



Neither a Borrower
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For Angela, with love.

The heat of summer and the heat of fever already seem to go together, although it's only been a few weeks since they brought me here and infected me with my sentence.

Jack came to see me the first week, before the fever came on. My arm still felt sore from where they injected me. It ached deep down in the muscle, like a tetanus shot. I begged him to smuggle me a pen and a sheaf of paper. He was reticent, worried that we would get in trouble, but I'd only been allowed to bring one book and I knew it wouldn't last me more than a couple of days. I was desperate for a way to while away the hours.

He finally agreed, and snuck a pen and paper to me stuck in the center of a large stack of legal forms I needed to sign. They let you have legal paperwork here.

I didn't have the chance to write anything down at first. After I got back to my room with the supplies I collapsed. The first onset hit me right then and I woke up in the infirmary two days later. Nurse Gunderson was looming over me – I could see her fat head and watery eyes swim into my blurry vision.

Nurse Gunderson. This one's finally awake.

I sat up in my bed. A short pudgy man in a white coat waddled over to me and timed my pulse with his wristwatch. His fingers felt cool on my neck. Then he checked my temperature. There was sunlight coming in through the windows.

Pudgy man. You'll live.

Me. What happ-

Before I could finish the question, the doctor interrupted me. His answer didn't stop him from walking away. It happens to everyone, he said. First dose is big. Your body's just getting used to it.

They kept me in the infirmary for another two days, then sent me back to my room. I didn't have much time to write then, either. I was still getting used to the daily routines. They were new and tough before I got sick – they were less new but tougher now:

6 AM – Lights on, Roll Call
6.15 AM – Breakfast
6.45 AM – Shower
7.15 AM – Classes:
 Debt Management
 Financial Planning
 Personal Finance
10.15 AM – Group
12 PM – Lunch
12.30 PM – Outside Recreation
2 PM – Skills Training
4 PM – Daily Speaker
5 PM – Dinner
5.45 PM Free Time
7.30 PM – Lights out

That's the schedule for every day except Sundays, which skip morning classes for an optional religious service. I know why everyone here has such a strained look all the time – it's tiring. There's so much to do every-day. It doesn't seem that bad at first glance, but it's so much more being sick on top of it.

It turned out that they don't care if I have a pen and paper. When we have unstructured time some people in here do things, others just sit and stare, or stay in their beds as much as they can, but the people watching us don't really care what we do. With everyone sick, it's not like any of us has more strength than a newborn kitten on wobbly legs anyway. Two weeks after I came out of the infirmary I braved taking a couple of blank pages and my pen out into the yard for outside time. I spread out my blanket in the shade under a tree and started to write. I started with just little things, things that wouldn't matter if my stuff got confiscated, but nothing happened. When the guards finally noticed they didn't care. Really, it's a pretty lax place. It'd practically be a huge, awful bed and breakfast if it weren't for the fence and the sickness.

But being stuck here really isn't the punishment – that's being sick.

The first couple of days here weren't that bad. Being away from my family, from Jack, that was rough, but I could handle it. They assigned me a room in one of the buildings and showed me around. Once I was settled in they brought me to the infection office and shot me up. That's why I recognized Nurse Gunderson after I woke up – she's the one that did it.

It took a couple of days to come on, they told me to expect that, and then it hit me. I felt like I was on a carnival ride, the room was spinning and spinning – it wouldn't stop. I remember, in my semi-conscious delirium, yelling at the conductor to stop the ride. I told him I was going to throw up on his brand new shoes. I didn't want to, but I would, if he made me. I woke up in the infirmary, Nurse Gunderson's bulbous head in the center of my vision.

After that I was always sick. That's the way it works. Some days it isn't as bad as others – it takes many different forms, nausea, headaches, fever, or just a disconnected, medicine-head feeling, but it's always there. It's a virus they give you. Something they engineered as a punishment – the varied, inconsistent symptoms are planned. They want every day to be a mystery – it could be hell, or just purgatory.

Once a week every inmate has a standing appointment with Nurse Gunderson for a booster. If they don't keep shooting you up your body fights off the virus. They don't tell you much about it, they don't want an

antivirus engineered on the outside and smuggled in for the patients, it's all very hush hush, but I know a few things I saw on the news. Everyone knows about the new prisons. Are they really prisons? There aren't many concrete walls or bars. But I guess they are. Your body becomes a prison.

The virus is short-term, that's why they have to keep shooting you up. The syringe they stick in your arm is half-virus and half-immunosuppressants, they give you those so they can keep the virus weak incase anyone from outside, or maybe the staff, gets it. Anyone not getting shot up can fight it off in a day. Not in here. They keep your body tranqed out. It's an elegant system, in a mad-scientist sort of way.

Sometimes, because of the immunosuppressants, the prisoners here get sick with other things – colds, mostly run of the mill stuff, they try to keep the grounds and buildings pretty sterile, but sometimes people get something worse. Then they get sent to Nurse Gunderson in the infirmary. She's a cold bitch when she's shooting you up, but I hear she has a kinder side when you're infected with something else. I wouldn't know – I haven't been here long enough to catch anything else.

I haven't really met anyone here yet. We're supposed to talk in group everyday, but talking to the other inmates in a big session isn't really meeting them. It's hard to find other things to do in my free time. I've already read my book three times and I'm sick of it. I've been writing when I had the energy. Mostly, though, it's not my antisocial attitude that's stopped me from making friends. It's this place, this sickness. It keeps people feeling horrible and subdued. Rarely do I see inmates talking except in group, when Dr. Cruizie makes them. And by rarely I mean I haven't seen it at all yet. Even during outside time people just spread out their blankets and lay in the grass in the shade. It's all anyone seems to have energy for. Maybe it's not just that, though. I think everyone is embarrassed to be here.

At least the grounds are beautiful. If it weren't for the fence and all the inmates splayed out like beached whales in hospital gowns, this place would seem more like a college campus than a prison. Everyone is just wearing medical bracelets instead of the more fashionable variety.

Huge, thick based trees dot a green carpet of grass around the inmate house. There's a medical building, a rec hall, an administration building, and a cafeteria house, but that's about it. Mostly it's just all green grass and trees. It's peaceful here, in a surreal sort of way.

The rooms are peaceful, too. Small, with two twin beds covered with rough wool quilts. I have an empty bed in my room because I don't have a roommate. The inmates who've been here long enough, those most adjusted to the ups and downs of the virus, they make things like the quilts for the rooms. Each bed has a nightstand and a desk. The more I talk about it, the more it sounds just like that college campus I mentioned earlier. Except everyone is sick, and everyone is supposed to be a criminal.

The security is pretty lax because all the inmates are infected. Just a few guards and a fence. The virus leaves bright red blotches on your skin in random places, so even if anyone did escape they'd have to hide out for awhile while the virus faded. The pamphlet they gave me when I was first admitted told me that even though the symptoms of the virus might fade when I left, without an injection of the cure when my sentence was complete, the virus would eventually kill me. I guess that's why security is so lax – the promise of a premature death keeps the inmates from

trying to escape. Who knows if it's true, but that fear is enough, I guess.
That seems the way with everything nowadays.

I feel like I've been writing this long enough to make some overarching statement about how time passes here – either quickly or slowly. It's either a statement like that or jump into the immediate present, which I hate to do – I love to read the history of the world, but don't feel like reading the newspaper. I suppose it's an eventuality, though. Even as an attempt to stall, I can't do it, talk about time here, because it's both fast and slow. The hours spent in the hot sunlight, or in the damp heat of the shade seem to drag out like a runaway kite caught in an updraft. The seconds tick by in classes like a tense murderer waiting for an execution stay. The nights, which seem like they would be filled with lonely, endless hours, they pass quickly in a feverish haze. I have strange, exotic dreams, but they sped by. Maybe they've got someplace better to be instead of inside my head.

I wish I did.

I don't, really. That's why I'm here in the first place. Everyone knows this is a possibility – most struggle to avoid it. I barely put up a fight. Maybe that's sad. Maybe it's just who I am. I don't really know, and it's hard to strive for any self-analysis with a temperature that meanders up and down. Thinking makes my head hurt.

Writing makes it a little better, but I'm not really sure if the words are really coming out right. If anyone ever reads this it might seem a little jumbled. Being sick makes your thoughts jump around. I read this story once by a dead writer, Vonnegut was his name, I think, called "Harrison Bergeron." It was about this futuristic society that was so in love with making everyone equal that they would give all the gifted people handicaps – stuff like weights that hung on strong people to weigh them down and earpieces that beeped in the ears of smart people once a minute to interrupt their thoughts and send them in a different direction. Being sick is kind of like those beeps – it makes your thoughts just jump around. So is debt, I guess.

I just reread all of what I've written so far and realized that it sounds like I wrote it all in one sitting, but I didn't. I just keep picking up from where I left off. Maybe that's why it sounds disjointed, too.

I've been in here for two weeks now and tomorrow is my day to talk in group. Everyone has to talk on a rotation, when someone new comes they add you to the end of the list you get assigned to. There were thirteen people in my group, Dr. Cruizie's group, and I got added as the fourteenth. I'm nervous about it. I've never been to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting or anything like that, but the group sessions are run like the AA meetings I've seen on television and movies:

Someone stands up and says why they are in prison, then everyone is supposed to offer advice to help out the situation and act better when the inmate gets back to the outside. But it doesn't really work like that. No one volunteers any advice because no one wants to talk. Dr. Cruizie ends up calling on people so they'll talk. They always say the same things though, and give the same advice. It's the same stuff they teach us in class.

I really don't want to talk in group tomorrow. Whenever anyone talks in group they always keep their eyes on the floor and Dr. Cruizie always tells them to look up and "face reality." He's a patronizing prat. I don't even know if his doctorate is in psychology. If it is, he couldn't have graduated very high in his class to get a job basically babysitting inmates through group. I shouldn't knock him in writing too much, in case this ever gets confiscated, but I can't really stand him. Or his little bow ties. He looks like a snarky pundit republican from one of those right-wing debate shows. I know Jack would hate him.

I just got back from the group where I had to introduce myself and talk. It was horrible. I knew it was going to be, but I didn't really know it would be as bad as it was. Right as group started I felt sick to my stomach, it was worse than any of the stomach swings I've had so far. Some of the inmates who look like they been here longer don't seem to react to the virus swings as much as those of us who seem to be new, but I don't know how anyone can deal with this and remain calm on the outside. When Dr. Cruizie looked at me and said my name to get me to stand up, my gut started whirring around like a kitchen mixer set on whip. My vision got all blurry and I wrapped my arms around my middle. I mumbled something about not feeling well, I asked Dr. Cruizie if I could go another day. The rest of the conversation went something like this:

Dr. Cruizie. No. We can't alter the rotation. Stand up and tell the group why you're here.

Me. I think I'm gonna throw up. Can I go see Nurse Gunderson?

Dr. Cruizie. It's just a normal swing. Take a deep breath and get started. You should know the standard format by now.

I took a deep breath and stood up from my plastic chair as best I could. The room spun dangerously, but I stayed upright.

Me. Okay.

Me. Okay.

Me. I'm Sacha. I'm here because I couldn't pay my student loans from college. My lender gave me six months to start payments after my grace period, but I couldn't find a job.

Dr. Cruizie. Say hello to Sacha, everyone.

Everyone. Hello, Sacha.

Me. Hello.

I tried to sit down, but Dr. Cruizie motioned for me to keep standing.

Me. Um.

Me. What else am I supposed to say? I don't feel very good.

Dr. Cruizie. Tell the group why you couldn't pay your loans.

Me. Oh.

Me. I couldn't find a job. My major was in Philosophy and there wasn't anyone looking for a Philosophy major. I couldn't find anything. After awhile my grace period was running out and I even tried to get a

job at Starbucks. But they told me that I didn't have the customer service skills they were looking for. They told me an ideal candidate had dual degrees in business communication and beverage technology.

Me. Can I sit down now?

Dr. Cruizie. Sacha, you'll need to pay more attention to the proper format or we're going to have a problem in here. What's the proper presentation order, everyone?

No one said anything so Dr. Cruizie pointed at a thin black woman who was fiddling with her med bracelet. I don't know how the woman knew Dr. Cruizie was pointing at her without looking up, but she started talking. I could hear the capitalization in her rattled-off list.

Woman. Name, Crime, Crime Resolution Difficulties, Overcoming Strategies, Personal Encouragement.

Dr. Cruizie. Thank you, Tereza. Thank Tereza for reminding us, everyone.

Everyone. Thank you, Tereza.

Dr. Cruizie. Good.

He sent a pointed look at me.

Me. Um.

Dr. Cruizie sighed and asked the class if they could help me find some Overcoming Strategies for my Crime. Again, no one spoke, so he started calling on people. I felt horrible.

Man with short black hair. Sacha could register with a Debt Management Agency that would help her find a way to work with her lender to find a Debt Repayment Strategy.

Dr. Cruizie. A DMA could help her find a DRS. Yes. Good. What else?

Cute Redhead. Sacha could get a position at a Temp Staffing Agency or a Government Work Program.

Dr. Cruizie. Yes. Yes. All good ideas. What else?

It went on and on like that, Dr. Cruizie going around the room and calling on people until everyone had repeated all the things they told us in class everyday. Finally, after everyone had spoken, he looked back at me. I could feel my face getting hot.

Dr. Cruizie. Remember these things, Sacha, they're all good ideas. You'll need to tell us your Overcoming Strategies next time it's your turn to speak in group.

Me. Okay.

I went to sit down, but he again stopped me with a gesture. My legs were wobbling pretty bad. I was having trouble standing up. My stomach was churning up something awful. My mouth began to salivate with that certain feeling I remembered from when I was twelve and got a bad case of the stomach flu.

Dr. Cruizie. Sacha, aren't you forgetting something?

Me. Um.

Dr. Cruizie. Your Personal Encouragement.

Me. Um.

Dr. Cruizie. Tell us something you like about yourself. Overcoming Strategies aren't enough. You need to believe that you're a good person. So tell us something you like about yourself.

He broke into a big smile. I threw up.

After that two of the other group members cleaned up my sick and while Dr. Cruizie finally let me sit down. He told me that next time it was my turn to speak I should do a better job keeping to the proper presentation order. I nodded weakly, but couldn't look at him. I felt terrible, but part of me was happy I'd messed up his proper little system.

Group continued as we were forced to talk about how to solve my crime when my sentence was up, but I felt a little better. We all looked at spreadsheets Dr. Cruizie passed out of my banking records, loan balances, and skillsets to help me solve my problems on the outside. I was just glad it would be another two weeks before I'd be put in the spotlight to stand and speak again in group.

After group another inmate finally talked to me. Tereza came up in the hallway outside our group room and told me that almost everyone threw up the first time they had to speak. She said I shouldn't let Dr. Cruizie get to me. After the first time it got easier.

Me. Does the virus ever get easier? Will I get used to it?

Tereza. Not really. Your body gets used to it, so they keep upping the dose every week. I guess it gets easier to put up with it, but you don't ever get used to it.

We walked to lunch together, but she eats in another room so I couldn't eat with her. I wanted to talk to her more, ask her questions, but I still didn't feel that good. I hope she's right, though, about it getting easier to put up with being sick. I hate it. I don't know how I'll be able to make it two years feeling like this. I'm miserable and I miss Jack.

Anyway, I'm going to take a break now and just lie in the sun. I might try to take a nap before skills training this afternoon. Between talking for the first time in group and then writing it all down I'm tired. I'm always tired now. Being in here is just a different kind of tired than it was on the outside.

My nap was alright at first. It felt nice to just drift off to sleep in the sunlight. It was a hot afternoon, August is always the worst month for that, so when I woke up when the loudspeaker went off to call us to skills training I was soaked in sweat. During skills training I could feel a sunburn coming on. The mix of constant fever and sunburn chills was so much that I tried to get Mrs. Waterhouse, our office skills trainer to let me out a little early so I could go get some water and aloe for my skin. I felt awful. She wouldn't let me leave her lecture about proper filing technique in a temp office job. The room was swimming with all sorts of colors while she told me I was a trouble maker, that I wasn't fitting in. I didn't respond. Tereza shot me a sympathetic look.

After skills training I was walking with Tereza to the daily speaker. Tonight we were supposed to be hearing from a man from a collections agency about the dangers of personal debt, but an aide from the warden stopped me in the hallway and told me the warden wanted to talk. Tereza looked frightened at first, but then it was obvious the aide was speaking to me, not her. I told her I'd meet her later. She left down the hallway without looking back. I followed the aide to the warden's office.

Except for the gates, the warden's office is the only place that has a constant standing guard. The aide talked to the guard while I stood in the hallway, wavering back and forth in my hospital slippers. My skin was hot, but I felt chilly down deep. The guard checked the ID hanging around my neck and gestured me inside.

The warden was sitting with his back to me as I entered, so I couldn't see his face. I'd only seen him once before, on the orientation video they showed me on the first day. I'd never met him in person.

His office was decorated in the old style, the walls were wood paneling and plaster, covered with degrees, awards, and pictures of him with important people. He spun in his chair when the door closed behind me with a soft click.

Warden Powers. Sacha, correct?

Me. Yes, sir.

I looked around for a chair to sit in, but there wasn't one. The warden looked a little older than I'd seen him in the video, his dark black hair was now frosted with a light grey. The skin of his face didn't look as

tight. I've heard that people's noses and ears keep growing as they age, but try as I might, I couldn't tell any difference.

Warden Powers. I've held this job for seven years, did you know that, Sacha? Before that, I was the junior warden of the Midwestern Regional Correctional facility. I worked under a hard man named Jacob Mortenson.

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. There was a model of a disciplinarian, if there ever was one. He taught me quite a few things about how to deal with troublemakers. Now, Sacha, I'm not Warden Mortenson. I like to think that I'm more lenient, different times, different measures, catching flies with honey, that sort of thing, but sometimes certain inmates still warrant the old ways to keep them in line. You understand me, Sacha?

I nodded.

Warden Powers. Good. Now, I've got some preliminary reports here about you. Your instructors say that you're not fitting in, that you're constantly trying to leave class and group, that you spend all your free time out in the yard writing on blank paper with a pen when you should be penciling through your workbook like a good little inmate. I don't like troublemakers, Sacha.

Warden Powers. Right now I'm willing to overlook your contraband items, even let you keep up with your scribbling if it helps you get rehabilitated. But you have to do something for me, Sacha, do you know what that is?

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. You're going to have to try harder to fit in here. Stop trying to skirt your responsibilities. Keep to yourself and focus on your studies. Keep your extracurricular writings to a minimum and do your best to learn how you can atone for your crime. You'll be with us for, let's see, two years. That's a long time, and it can be easy or it can be tough. It's up to you, Sacha. Do we understand each other?

Me. Yes, sir.

Warden Powers. Good, good. Now run along to your room. I don't want you interrupting the daily speaker. At 5 PM you are to report to dinner strictly on time, as well as everything after that from now on. Dismissed.

I left his office and went back to my room, my head spinning with fever and his words. Both left me chilly. I didn't want him to take my pen and paper. Since Jack brought them to me, they're the only things that feel like they keep me sane in this place. Before I came here I always used to watch Jack writing in the evenings while I watched t.v. in the living room. Our apartment has a nook in the kitchen and he set up his work laptop there after dinner. Most times he was working, but sometimes when I wandered in there during a commercial to get a drink he would shut his computer really quick. He said he was working, but I always wondered what he was really doing, before the recorded laughs on the sitcom I was watching made me forget about it.

When Jack brought me the pen and paper I asked for, he told me that all those evenings in the kitchen he was working on a polemic against debtor prisons. He said that he wasn't sure if he would ever try to get it published, it would get him fired from the firm and possibly even disbarred if he did publish it, but he told me he couldn't just sit by and do nothing. I guess he knew I was headed here before I did, at least for sure.

I doubt it'll help, even if he does get it published. If he lost his job he'd probably end up right here too, since he couldn't pay his law school loans. If that happened, he'd deal with it, though. He's stronger than me, he keeps doing everything he can. Even if it did something, that kind of change takes years. He probably won't try to get it published. His attempts to convince the credit agencies to let him pay my loans will probably be all he can do.

Either way, I guess that I need to do better to deal in here. I need to talk to Tereza again and see if there's anything I can do to make the sickness better, make it easier to cope.

Opps, it's already 4.55, I've got to hurry or I'm going to be late for dinner.

At dinner I set my tray down on Tereza's table. She eats lunch in another room, but she's in my dinner room. Before I sat down Tereza looked up at me, a look of fear, then quickly reeled it back, dropping her eyes down to her mash potatoes.

I sat down and started in on my jello. It was red, with grapes in it. It felt good to eat something – I hadn't eaten much lunch or breakfast. Between bites, without raising my eyes up to meet hers, I whispered to her.

Me. How come no one talks here?

Tereza. Ssh. I don't want to get in trouble. You just had to meet with the warden. The guards will be watching you. Don't talk to me.

Me. C'mon. Help me out. I need to know more about this place. I'm drowning. You've been here awhile, you can help me.

Tereza. I can't. Just leave me alone. You'll figure it out, just do what they say.

Me. I can't. How can you stand it? I feel so awful all the time.

Tereza. That's the point. Now, please, be quiet.

She looked up at me, just a quick glance, as if to punctuate her message. I tried asking her more questions, whispering them in between wiggly mouthfuls of jello, but she acted like she didn't hear me.

Now it's free time. I have to start working on my workbook now, for class tomorrow. There's a guard obviously looking at me and getting that antsy look.

God, the assignment is about credit rating. I hate credit rating.

It's been hard to find as much time to write lately because I've been doing my best to *look* like I'm keeping busy with my workbook, which, unfortunately, mostly means *actually* keeping busy with my workbook. I'm thinking about slipping some pages inside to write on, like a kid in my 4th grade classes used to do with his comic books during English class.

I've tried for the last three days at dinner to speak with Tereza again, but she won't talk to me, no matter what I try. She can't make a scene by getting up from the table when I sit down at hers, but she slowly inches away from me until she's sitting as far away as she can get. Tonight she got a reprimand for being late to dinner because she waited until I'd already been forced to sit down by one of the guards before she came in. She was late, but she was able to sit at another table.

At this rate we're both just going to get in more trouble. It seems less and less likely now that I'm going to get a chance to talk to her at dinner. She's not in my lunch room, so that's out. I'm never able to find her during outside time or free time. Still, there's got to be a way to reach her and make her talk to me. I'm not really sure what to do.

Today the guest speaker was a literature professor from the community college. I recognized her from campus – the Philosophy department and English department were in the same building. I remember hearing about how all the professors had to come and be a guest speaker once a year here as part of their community service duties from their appointment. It has to be debt related.

The professor's specialty was Shakespeare – she gave a talk about the advice Laertes's father Polonius gives him, focusing on the lines "Neither a borrower or a lender be, For loan oft loses both self and friend." Her lecture was packed to the brim with fancy diction, mostly telling us we were fools for getting loans and buying on credit in the first place. I wonder if that's the same thing she tells her students even though most of them probably take out student loans to be able to attend her class. I guess everyone changes faces when they need to, but it seems hypocritical, if you ask me. Not that anyone does. I always liked Ophelia better anyway.

I still can't get anyone to talk to me at all outside class and group. Everyone still just keeps to themselves.

Two more days since I last wrote and I might have a lead. Today after outside time I took a different route to the skills training building and I noticed the direction Tereza comes from. She looked like she was walking from behind the chapel where we can go on Sundays. Maybe she hangs out over by there. I'm going to check it out during outside time tomorrow.

I got a letter from Jack today. It's dated a week ago, but we're only allowed to get mail once every two weeks, so they save them until mail day. He told me that he's going to see me the next time we can have visitors, which is the Sunday after next. Because of the way the letter was dated that means I should be able to see him next Sunday, in a week. It's been a month since I saw him last. I'm hoping he brings me more paper. I'm rapidly running out.

It's been hard to be here without him – aside from being sick, the loneliness without him has probably been the worst. Because of his law degree he would always talk to me about what was going on in the world, about the direction the country was heading. I was never that interested in what he would talk to me about, but I enjoyed listening to him talk. We used to lie in bed at night before we went to sleep. I'd put my ear against his chest and listen to the rumble of his voice as he told me about the cases he was working on or some outrageous civil rights debate he'd heard on NPR on the way to work. Hearing his voice like that, up close and deep, it made me feel protected. I miss it, being here.

His letter is similar. I can tell that he doesn't know what to write about aside from platitudes about missing me. I know he's busy with work, though. He probably doesn't have much time to think about me. Instead, most of his letter is about a recent media scandal in Colorado, a nurse at a debtor prison there was just caught injecting saline into the inmates instead of the virus. She'd been doing it for eight weeks. The prisoners kept that they felt better to themselves. None of them wanted their doses upped. I might ask Nurse Gunderson if she knows anything about that, but I don't want to have to explain how I know about it. We're not supposed to get anything except personal news in letters.

I caught up with Tereza during outside time today. She spends it behind the chapel, like I thought yesterday. There's a spot in the shade by a maintenance shed that is out of the view of some of the guards, so a few of the inmates congregate there during outside time. When they saw me most of them left, but I caught Tereza's arm and stopped her. I would get in major trouble for if I got caught touching her, but I didn't want her to leave.

Tereza. Let me go. I told you to leave me alone.

Me. Hold on. I need to ask you some questions. You keep avoiding me.

Tereza. I don't want to get double-dosed. That's the punishment if they catch us talking.

Me. Double-dosed?

Tereza. They inject you with double virus for a week. They did it to me the second month I was here. It was hell. They don't have anything like solitary, so that's the punishment for misbehaving. I don't want to go through it again. Let go of my arm.

Me. No. Not until you talk to me.

All the other inmates left, casting nervous glances at Tereza and me.

Me. You talked to me first. The least you can do is answer my questions.

Tereza shrugged off my arm then crossed hers. She glared at me, but didn't walk away.

Me. I heard that some other nurse in another prison was just injecting saline – Nurse Gunderson ever do that?

Tereza shook her head. My stomach flip-flopped over itself. My head ached.

Me. How do you stand it then? How do deal with being sick every single day? How do you keep it together without going crazy? I don't want to leave this place being some brainwashed drone from all this stupid school and sickness.

Tereza. You already know how people stand it. You just don't want to do it. They put their heads down and just deal. They stick to the schedule and don't do anything they don't have to. They just give in to it. They're not always spending all their energy writing all the time like you are, or getting in arguments with Dr. Cruizie or Mrs. Waterhouse.

Me. No. That can't be all of it. There has to be more to it than that.

Tereza turned to leave.

Tereza. There isn't. Just keep your head down and deal. Stop making trouble. That's what the rest of us have learned to do.

She left after that and I couldn't find her again. It was too hot to walk all over the grounds looking for her or the other inmates I'd seen behind the chapel. My head ached from the bright sun and I felt weak.

I don't think I believe her. The other inmates do look subdued, but more than once I've noticed a quiet fire burning in their eyes that has to be more than fever. They know something that I don't. I need to find out what that is, or I'm not sure that I'll be able to survive in here for two years.

I want to keep digging, I'm just not sure how else to go about it.

This last week passed without incident. I decided that until I figure out another way to make this place make sense, the best thing to do was probably to stick to Tereza's advice. I've kept my head down, done my work, but kept my eyes open. All I see is the same routines. I've a sneaking suspicion that maybe everyone else on the planet is a robot and I'm the only human alive and this is all just a super-secret experiment to see how much the last human on earth can take. If I could figure out how to write down a weary, "that was a lame joke" sigh, this is where I would write it.

In a few hours I have my weekly visit with Nurse Gunderson for my booster. My appointment is always right after dinner on Friday's. I've spent most of my free time this week lying on my back in the sunlight trying to figure out a tactful way to ask her about the nurse in Colorado. Maybe there's some way I could convince her to give me a week off?

I don't know how long I can write today. I'm so weak I can barely hold my pen. My booster with Nurse Gunderson last night didn't go well at all. I tried to talk to her about the nurse in Colorado, did my best to try and just barely hint at what I wanted, a week without the virus.

She looks like a thick old bird, but underneath those beady little eyes is a shrewd lady. She understood what I was trying to hint at pretty quickly, while she was readying my injection. Without skipping a beat she told me she'd left something in the other room and left with her kit before I could even stand up from the examining table. I heard the door lock behind her.

I paced the small examining room for thirty minutes by the count of wall clock, then the door opened again. Instead of Nurse Gunderson, Warden Powers entered the room with a kit. He set it down and crossed his arms.

Warden Powers. Sacha, Sacha. What are we going to do with you?

Me. Um?

Warden Powers. I tried to warn you, Sacha, I really did. I told you to straighten up and fly right, but you insist on making trouble. Well, now it's time for you to face the consequences. This isn't like a normal prison here, did you know that, Sacha?

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. We don't have any of the typical means that regular prisons have to punish unruly inmates here, things like extra work or solitary confinement. Those things tend to only give inmates the idea that making trouble isn't much of a breach of the social code. No, we like to be a little more tactical here. Give me your arm, Sacha.

Me. What are you going to do?

Warden Powers. Punish you.

I struggled with him, but he's a big man. He overpowered me and held me down while injecting me in the arm. I could smell his scent, a sweet talcum over a rank stench of sweat. He grunted as he stuck me, sighing in release while the syringe plunger descended. When he was finished he stepped back, tossed the spent syringe in the medical waste basket, and wiped his hands on his slacks.

Warden Powers. There we go. Now, Sacha, this week might be a little more tough for you than normal, but you better do your best to deal with it if you don't want next week to continue with a higher dosage.

Me. You double-dosed me?

Warden Powers. Tripled, actually. Double didn't seem enough for a trouble-maker of your stature. We'll see if you learn some discipline. If not, there are a few other things we can do, but we'll only use them if it seems necessary. You be good now!

He left after that, leaving the door open. I walked slowly out of the medical facility, passing Nurse Gunderson, who gave me an angry look but said nothing.

That night was awful. I lay awake in my bed, the ceiling swimming in drippy, wet sheets. I'm not sure if I slept at all, if I dreamt or if all the nasty things I saw were just hallucinations. Terrible things screamed at me out of the semidarkness, lights flashed bright colors. My body was weighted to the bed like it was encased in concrete. I gulped water from the glass on the bedside table – it went down like sand.

I hope the first night is the worst. I hope it gets better. Jack's coming to visit me tomorrow and I don't want him to see me like this.

I have to go. Tereza is here to take me to skills training. She's been pushing me around all day in a wheelchair since there's no way I can stand.

God, I feel awful. I'm going to do my best never to stand up too tall again. It's obvious that the tallest stalks just get lopped off by the tyrant's cane. Or something. Said Herodotus.

I opted out of the church service today. It's the only real choice we get to make once a week, and today I was grateful for it. Sleep last night was brutal, so I'm skipping church to try to catch a few more Z's before Jack comes. I'm so excited to see him. I wish I didn't feel so awful.

I can't believe they made him leave! I've waited a month to see him, I've been stuck in this dreadful place for over a month already and the one thing I was looking forward to, the one thing that was really keeping me going was knowing I could see Jack today. I was counting the days.

He was only here for a few minutes. At least, that's how long it seemed. It might have been a little longer – my head is still swimming with the overdose they gave me, being this ill almost distorts time.

I was waiting in the visitor's center when Jack walked in the door. He looked wonderful, dressed in a dark grey suit with a lavender shirt and green tie. His hair was oiled back, slick – I love it when he does his hair like that.

I could smell his cologne as he sat down at the table next to my wheelchair. He looked so concerned, but all I could focus on was his smell. It's things like that you don't know you're missing until they come back.

I hugged him once before the guards told us we weren't allowed to touch. Jack asked about my wheelchair, I told him it was nothing, that I sprained my ankle out in the yard. I don't know why I lied to him – I guess I just didn't want to take the time to explain. It was almost as though I could sense we didn't have much time to talk. No, that's not right, I couldn't sense it, I just didn't want to waste the time.

Jack told me he was making good headway with the credit agencies – he was looking into ways to get them to agree to let him pay my loans so I could get a suspended sentence. He told me a few possibilities, but I don't remember them now – I wasn't really listening, I was just so happy to see him.

Between the excitement of seeing him and the ramped up sickness, I felt all woozy in his presence. His words sounded distant and far off. It was like that feeling that you get when you just sit still, I mean really sit still and let your eyes unfocus and relax until the world around you fills up with hum and you can feel your heart beating and the blood marching through your veins. When you sit like that, lightly lolling your neck on your shoulders, you get this weird sensation, an odd feeling, like a disconnection that makes you wonder how strange a place the world really is, and how all your senses might be lying to you. You wonder, if

only you could see past what you can see, or hear more than you can hear, all relaxed and silent like that, you're sure that you're so close to reaching something more, but every time you think you're on to something, every time you're almost there, you get excited, you reach for it, and in the reaching, it pulls away until it's gone.

In feeling that, sitting next to Jack, our knees touching under the table, I must have begun to describe it to him, interrupting whatever legal nonsense he was talking about, because he got a funny look on his face and linked his pinky finger with mine.

Jack. You know, I was just thinking about that the other day.

Me. Oh?

Jack. I get this feeling sometimes, when I'm deep in the middle of doing mundane things like paying bills or doing the dishes that the only reason I'm doing those things is so I can have the freedom to do what I really want to do later, that all the little things we hate to do in life are just paying a debt that we all owe, but I'm not sure to what. Sacha, it's like we're all debtors somehow, and I don't mean just you and the other people in here, and I'm not talking about money, I mean, we're all just borrowing from something that we're never going to be able to pay back.

Me. You mean it's all borrowed time.

Jack. A bit of a cliché, but, yes. And what happens when we can't pay anymore? What happens when we lose our ability to keep paying? I don't really know.

Me. I don't know either. But feeling like this, so sick like this, sick in my body, sick of this debt, I'm almost ready to find out. God, Jackie, I've missed you so much. I've tried to be strong in here but no one will talk to me and all the things that I love so much are missing.

That's when they came and took him away. They escorted him out of the room, explaining to him over his rising protests that I was being punished for bad behavior and it was only by an oversight that he was let in to see me. He tried to resist, but they insisted. I went to roll after him but a guard locked my wheels from behind. I was too weak to reach down and unlock them. By the time I looked up again, Jack was gone.

Those miserable bastards.

I haven't written since last Sunday, when they took Jack away from me. I spent the rest of my punishment week half dazed with sickness, depressed and weak. Warden Powers called me into his office again and told me that if my behavior was impeccable I might be able to see Jack next month, but my even if I behaved there's a chance I won't be able to see him since I'd seen Jack when I wasn't supposed to. I don't understand how that's fair – the warden never told me I wasn't supposed to get a visit from Jack as part of my punishment. Not that I would have listened, anyway. It was great to see him. I just hope that I'll be able to see him next month.

I haven't written here since last Sunday, but I wrote Jack a letter after they took him away from me. Mrs. Waterhouse said I looked so miserable that she agreed to mail it for me, even though inmates aren't supposed to mail letters. That was a kindness I won't forget. I just hope she sent it and didn't just report me to the Warden.

I've been thinking a lot about what Jack was talking about, and most of it seems right. I can't exactly place my finger on it, like I've mentioned before the virus makes it hard to do any in-depth thinking, but there's something there to think about. It'll keep me busy, at least, thinking about it.

Maybe that's what all the other inmates are doing all the time when they're staring off into space. Thinking about all the things they owe. Thinking about how much everything is just borrowed.

Nurse Gunderson took my wheelchair away from me this morning while I went down to breakfast. It's unfortunate, I'd gotten used to the comfort of rolling around with a chair wherever I wanted it. There just aren't any chairs in comfortable places here. Only the classrooms and cafeteria have them. Every other place we're forced to stand. It's horrible – it was so much better to be able to sit. It makes you feel better.

I wish she hadn't taken it away today, because I had to speak again in group before lunch. If I'd still had the wheelchair I would have been able to stay sitting down during my recitation of the "proper presentation format." It went more smoothly than I expected it to, at least up until the end. I aped all the things I'd heard the other inmates say, parroted off all the things I'd learned from the repetitive classes.

The only snag I had was on the Personal Encouragement section. I was about to sit down, hoping to skirt the thing entirely, when Dr. Cruizie shot me a look. I knew what it was about. I tried to get away with a lame mumbled "I have people who love me," but it didn't fly.

Dr. Cruizie. Sacha, we believe in personal responsibility here. If you depend on a Personal Encouragement like that, you'll never learn to take matters into your own hands to solve your problems. Now, what else can you think of that gives you Personal Encouragement?

One of the things that I hate about Dr. Cruizie is that I can hear the capitalization in his voice when he says the buzzwords. He makes them sound like they're eternal rules of the universe or something equally over-hyped.

Me. Um.

Dr. Cruizie. Sacha, you've done a good job today, don't go messing it all up now. Please, tell us, what gives you Personal Encouragement?

I tried to think back to the things I'd heard other inmates say, but my mind chose this time to draw a blank. I usually space out during these presentations. So I just picked the first thing on my mind and ran with it. It seemed to me that this place wanted me to be the exact opposite of what I was, so I took what Jack and I had talked about, and reversed it.

Me. I believe it's right for me to repay my debts. I know that everything I borrow I have to pay back, no matter what it is.

Dr. Cruizie frowned a little at this, it obviously wasn't the answer he was expecting, but it seemed to satisfy him. He motioned for me to sit down. I did, with a silent sigh of relief.

Tereza didn't speak to me until two days after Nurse Gunderson took my wheelchair. We were in skills training, learning database skills in the computer lab so we could get a temp office job once we were released. I doubt Tereza would have spoken to me at all, but two lucky things happened that made it possible:

1. Tereza was the last person into the lab, so she had to take the only open station, which was right next to me.

2. Mrs. Waterhouse left the room for a few minutes. I'm not sure why – it's never happened before, but there it was, and I jumped on the opportunity to talk to Tereza.

She was reticent at first, trying her best to subtly glance around the lab to make sure Mrs. Waterhouse was gone.

Tereza. Why did you get double-dosed? Are you stupid?

Me. Triple, actually. And no, I'm not stupid. I tried to hint to Gunderson that she should give me a break. I guess she didn't like my hints – she told the Warden.

Tereza. You idiot. Of course she reported you. What did you think was going to happen?

Me. I guess I thought it might work, that she'd lay off for a week.

Tereza was quiet for a second. I thought she was done talking to me, or maybe that Mrs. Waterhouse was back in the room, but a quick glance around told me that wasn't true. Finally Tereza spoke again, resuming her conspiratorial whisper.

Tereza. Powers must have it in for you, to give you a triple dose on a first offense. I don't know what you did to attract his attention, but you better lay low for awhile.

Me. That's what I've been trying to do.

Tereza. You almost lost it in group the other day. Not exactly laying low.

Me. Well it's tough, okay? Maybe you're used to feeling like crap all the time, but I'm not, even after all the time I've been here. I can't get used to this. You and all the other inmates seem like you're not even sick.

Tereza looked away from the monitor she'd been pretending to be engrossed in, and stared into my eyes. She looked like she was studying

me, her brown eyes flitted back and forth in mine as if looking for a secret.

Tereza. Look, there is a way.

She looked around to see if anyone was listening. It didn't look like anyone was, but it was hard to tell.

Tereza. Meet me behind the chapel tomorrow during outside time and I'll tell you about it. Just be careful. Make sure none of the guards see you go back there – we have to come separately. Got it?

I nodded, turning back to my monitor and doing my best to pretend I was working. It worked so well I didn't even notice Mrs. Waterhouse come back in. When class was over I was surprised to find out that I'd finished the database training without thinking about it. The whole time my mind was swimming with questions. Maybe this is the answer I've been looking for. Maybe not. I just don't want to feel sick anymore.

Today during outside time I met Tereza like she told me to, behind the chapel. At first I wasn't sure that she was going to show, I waited twenty minutes and was on the cusp of deciding she'd just blown me off when she appeared from around the corner, looking skittish.

Me. Hi, I wasn't sure that-

Tereza. Look, we don't have much time, I'm not sure if anyone saw us come back here. So just shut up and listen to me. Nurse Gunderson doesn't prepare the syringes herself, except in special cases like when they double dose someone. Most of the syringes are sent presealed from the company that manufactures the virus for the prison system. They keep them locked up in a special cabinet in the med building.

Me. Okay, but how does that-

Tereza. Shut up and listen, I said! She's lazy, she has an aide that takes the syringes out for everyone's boosters and lays them out for her. The aide is a guy who works in the med building, his name is Trevor. I don't know how he does it, but he can make it so you don't get sick for a week. He probably swaps the live virus syringes with saline ones before he gives them to Gunderson. He's the guy you want to talk to.

Me. How do I talk to him? What do I say?

Tereza. I'm getting to that. Just find him and tell him you're "interested in feeling better." He'll know what you mean. You'll have to work out the rest with him. He leaves before dinner, so you'll have to find a way to get a hold of him during outside time.

Me. Thanks, Tereza.

Tereza. Don't thank me. If you get caught, you didn't hear this from me. Go now. We need to leave apart so it doesn't look like we were talking.

I left. So that's what she told me. I didn't have time after we talked to go find Trevor, but I'm going to try tomorrow.

Thinking about this for a minute, I probably shouldn't have written what Tereza told me down. It makes this paper record even more of a liability if they ever took it. I'll have to find someplace to hide it in my room. There's a place under the bottom drawer of the desk – when you pull out the bottom drawer you can set stuff on the floor and put the drawer back in. That seems the best place.

I've been trying for the last two days to watch the med building to see if there's a way to slip inside during outside time, but I haven't had a chance yet. There's always someone coming or going and I don't have any reason to go in there. I'm not sure how I would explain myself if I got caught going inside without a reason. I need to figure something out. I have a few ideas, but all feel risky:

1. I could fake an illness aside from the virus, like a head cold or something like that, but that's what it would be, faking it. I don't want to get extra dosed again if they caught me in my lie. Getting triple-dosed was one of the worst experiences of my life. I never want to go through that again.

2. I could cut myself. It could either look like an accident, or I could say I did it on purpose and hope it got me taken to the med building. With something that dire I'm not sure if I would be left alone to find Trevor, though.

3. I've heard of some inmates replacing skills training in their schedules with work in some of the buildings, but I think you have to be here for awhile to get something like that. They want you to have all the skills they teach you in the skills training rotation first. My classes have started to repeat, but skills training hasn't yet, so I don't think I've "learned" them all.

- 4.

That's all I have so far, three options and an empty fourth. I wrote four down anyway, hoping it would spur my imagination into something brilliant at the end of the list, but nothing else came. I guess I'll just keep watching and feeling terrible. My throat is sore today, which is a new symptom, but more tolerable than headaches or stomach flu. Small blessings, I guess.

After three days of awful symptoms following my last entry, I've decided to just risk it tomorrow. I can't take feeling like this all the time. The inconsistency is the worst, I can't get used to not knowing what's going to happen everyday. My daily schedule would be exactly the same everyday except for Sunday if it weren't for the swings of the virus. That's part of the punishment, I think, keeping you on such a consistent daily routine so the changes in your body are more apparent. Whoever came up with this system, it works dreadfully well.

I hope they die from an incurable disease.

I did it. I snuck in to the med facility today. I waited outside the building in the grass on my blanket, pretending to sleep like I have been the whole time I've been watching the building. I was watching the people go in and out, trying to keep track of who was in the building and who wasn't. After forty-five minutes of watching, all the people I'd seen enter had come out. Certainly there were still others inside, but no inmates, as far as I could tell. I gathered up my blanket and slipped inside.

I walked in, past the reception desk like I had an appointment with Nurse Gunderson. Down the hallway filled with examining rooms I kept my eyes open, ready to slip into one if anyone should give me a weird look. No one did.

I'd never been past the examination rooms before. The hallway ended in a "T" intersection, splitting off in both directions. A sign said bathrooms were to the right, so I went left. I walked slowly and cautiously. Getting caught now would mean at least some sort of scene, but I'd have to play it by ear. My heart was pounding in my chest, my back was cold with sweat. I wanted to turn back, leave, but then I'd just have to brave this another day. Better to get it over with.

Down the left hallway and around a corner, I found a young man in scrubs sitting at a computer. Behind him was a large glass case filled with medical supplies – bottles of pills and liquids sealed with metal caps. The young man spoke without looking up from the computer.

Young man. You're not supposed to be back here. Bathrooms are the other way. Follow the blue line on the floor.

I mumbled a quick thank you and turned to leave, but couldn't do it. I had to ask him now. I didn't know if I would get a chance like this again.

Me. Who are you? I've never seen you before.

Young man. I'm Trevor. Do you need something else? You really shouldn't be back here.

Me. No, no. I was just looking for the bathrooms, like you said. Sorry that I bothered you. It's just that I get lost sometimes because I'm always sick. I wish I felt better.

That's how I said it. The line wasn't exactly what Tereza told me to say, but I couldn't figure out any other way to work it into the conversation. I hoped that he'd get the general gist of my hints.

His eyes snapped up from the computer for the first time to look at me. He studied me for a moment, then looked around. I'm getting used to the eye study/look around gesture – everyone here seems to do it.

Trevor. How did you find out? Do you know what you want?

Me. A friend. I just want to feel better.

He stood up, took me by the arm, and led me back down the hallway to an examining room. Inside he locked the door behind us and spun to look at me again.

Trevor. What did your friend tell you?

Me. Just that you make people feel better, give them a break.

Trevor. Maybe I do that. Maybe I don't. If I did know a way, it isn't free.

Me. What do you want? I don't have any money.

Trevor. I don't want money. Your friend didn't tell you?

Me. No.

Trevor. It's a "you scratch my back" kinda deal. Only it isn't my back I want scratched.

He gave me a little grin as it slowly dawned on me what he wanted. My face got warm and it wasn't just from the fever. It was stupid of me to think that he'd help for free. I mean, what else did I really have?

Trevor. So, you in? Hurry up already, I gotta get back to my desk.

Me. Um.

Trevor. You're either in or out. Let's have an answer.

Me. Um.

Trevor. I don't have time for this. Come back when you make up your mind. You tell anyone about this and I'll make sure you get extra dosed every week. Clear?

He left me in the examining room, feeling stupid.

This last week has been hell, my mind plagued with swirling thoughts. I've gotten by alright in my daily routines, but I've been sicker than usual this week. Just knowing that if I spent a few minutes alone with Trevor I could make it all go away seems like it makes the virus even worse.

The thing is, I don't think I can do that to Jack. If he found out, he'd be devastated. And with all the help he's trying to give me, working with the credit agencies, it'd be a kick in the face. Thinking all this has just made my week worse. The only solace I've had came in the form of a letter from Jack. It was full of news, more information about that nurse in Colorado. She was convicted of hampering justice and sentenced to three years in a normal prison. That isn't great news. If Trevor finds out about it he'll probably only up his price, which deters any hope I had of bargaining him into something else, though I don't know what that would be.

Jack also wrote me that he found a loophole in the student loan repayment plan that might help us. It looks like he can repay my loans and get me out of jail if we were married. He didn't go into any more detail than that, I'm not sure if I was supposed to take that as a proposal or not. I doubt it.

We talked about it once, about a year after we started dating, before we moved in together. We were in his kitchen. I was cooking for him, lemon juice shrimp scampi and sting beans. We'd already had a couple of glasses of wine. I was feeling pretty tipsy, having fun pushing the shrimp around in the frying pan.

Jack was feeling amorous, he was standing behind me and inching his hands down my pants as I cooked. I made a show of smacking his hands away, protesting that I was trying to concentrate, but I didn't really mind.

A half an hour later the smoke alarm went off. We'd let dinner burn, but I don't think either of us minded.

After opening the windows to clear the smoke, we sat out on the balcony finishing off the wine while we waited for the pizza delivery guy. That's when we decided to move in together, but the momentum of the conversation was such, it went a little further, dancing around the issue of getting married someday. Neither of us wanted to push it too far, and

the delivery driver's knock on the door halted it completely. We never brought it up again.

Until now, that is. If you can call a letter like that "bringing it up."

It's something to think about, anyway. I still have twenty-two months in this place if it isn't an option.

It's a weird juxtaposition, placing the idea of marriage and Trevor's bribe up against each other in my mind. It's weird how close both seem. No, that's not quite what I mean, it's just...well, in the end, the payment is the same. I guess phrasing it like that doesn't seem fair to Jack.

Either way, I've been trying all week to get another chance to talk to Tereza and ask her what the hell. I want to know if she pays Trevor. I want to know how she can do it. I don't want to feel sick anymore, but I'm not sure I'm ready to pay that.

I got to talk to Tereza today in skills training. Mrs. Waterhouse left the room again for some reason. I wonder what keeps calling her away? Anyway, Tereza and I's conversation went like this:

Me. I spoke to Trevor. You could have told me what he wanted before you sent me to talk to him.

Tereza. What did you think he would want? Money? We'll all in here because we owe. If you're too stupid to figure out what else he would want, well, I guess I know how you ended up in here. If you wanna stay sick it's your loss.

Me. Do you pay him?

Tereza got silent for a moment.

Tereza. I used to.

Me. So, what, now you just stay sick?

Tereza. No. He doesn't charge me anymore. I provide him other services.

Me. Like what?

Then it dawned on me.

Me. You help him. You send people to him. So you did know and you just never told me. How could you do that?

Tereza. It's a rough world. What do you expect? We're all just trying to survive. Nothin's free. We all owe, every one of us. That's just the way it is.

I wanted to ask her more questions, how long she'd worked for Trevor, how she found out about him, and other things like that, but our conversation was halted by the reappearance of Mrs. Waterhouse. She came back in the room, told us to stop our whispering and get back to work.

Mrs. Waterhouse. I don't want to have to tell Warden Powers you two were talking. Don't make me tell you again.

Tereza shot me a nasty look.

For class this week we have to do a writing assignment, an essay that “details all the bad decisions that caused you to get into debt.” I’m having trouble with it, because the more I’ve thought about it, the more I feel duped. I mean, I knew that getting a degree in Philosophy wasn’t going to make employers line up on my doormat, but I thought that I’d be able to find something that would use my skills and interests.

It feels wrong to me that I was even allowed to get a degree in Philosophy with the job market the way it is. The way that they teach us to think about university degrees nowadays is little more than job training – the ancient concept about a true liberal arts education is outdated by alternative information sources like the internet. So why keep silly majors like Philosophy offered at all if for no other reason than to lure unsuspecting undergrads with a predisposition for head-in-the-clouds thought into crushing debt? It seems disingenuous that the branch of human knowledge that elevated humanity and brought us up out of the darkness of ignorance is relegated now to nothing more than a recipe for debt slavery.

Of course, I can’t write any of that sort of thing into my essay – I’d instantly be sent to Nurse Gunderson for another triple dose. But it’s tough to lie. I’m so glad I have this extra record. I don’t know what I would do without it.

There's a new girl in my group. I don't know her name yet, it hasn't been her turn to speak, but she's the first person added since I was, so I'm interested. The longer I spend in this place, the more I come to understand exactly how insane the entire thing is. Everyone else I've met in here has been in longer than me – they'll all pretty used to it by now. As far as I know, I'm the only one who seems to be resisting it, even if I'm the only one that can see that. I'd like to talk to this new girl – maybe, since she's new here, she'll have some different ideas.

I haven't spoken to Tereza again since Mrs. Waterhouse threatened us with a trip to the warden. I've seen Trevor, though. I went in for my booster and he was walking down the hallway as I went to the examining room. He winked at me, that bastard.

The days are flying by in a feverish haze. The unrelenting heat of summer is dissipating into the coolness of autumn rapidly. The Indian summer days are getting rarer. I can feel my body becoming acclimated to the virus in a way that frightens me. It slows my thoughts down and that's exactly what's scary. I turned my essay in today after filling it with an overzealous account of how I got into debt, submitting a supplementary section that outlines a carbon-copy of all the drivel they've pushed into me. The thing that frightens me most is that all the things they've taught me in class make a sick sort of sense. I feel like I'm losing my mind.

I have something I'm looking forward to, though. The new girl is up to speak in group today. She has an odd air about her that makes me curious about her circumstances. Certainly it will end up being something mundane, all the stories I hear in here end up being mundane, but my curiosity is building all the same.

More about this after group today.

It turns out I was mistaken. Regan's story is anything but mundane. It makes an absurd amount of sense and any more introductions would just be useless. Here's how group went today:

Dr. Cruizie was wearing his red bowtie. I can tell he always feels more important on the days he wears his red bowtie, and today was no exception. Maybe that's why he picked me to be the "proper presentation format" recitation monkey. Normally he avoids calling on me. I think I unsettle him.

Me. Name, Crime, Crime Resolution Difficulties, Overcoming Strategies, Personal Encouragement.

Dr. Cruizie. Thank you, Sacha. Please go ahead, Regan, and do be careful you stick to the proper format.

The new girl stood up. She was dressed the same as the rest of us, in the standard hospital gown and slippers, but somewhere she'd found a piece of red ribbon and tied it around her waist like a belt. I didn't know how she got away with something like that, but once she started speaking it was obvious that Regan liked to do something different, if for no other reason than it made her stand out. Dangerous, in here.

Regan. Sure thing, pops. Alright, hello, guys. Like pops said –

Dr. Cruizie. Ahem.

Regan. Right. Like *Dr. Cruizie* said, my name's Regan. I've been sitting here for a week and a half listening to all of you list off your debts, mine's pretty much the same. Student loans, I got a hell of a lot of 'em on account of switching my major three times before I dropped out. I got all this debt built up, see, but I couldn't pay it back.

Regan paused to think here. Or maybe it wasn't to think. Maybe it was for dramatic effect. It seemed more like that because she took out a package of cigarettes and lit one, slowly letting the smoke curl out of her mouth. She blew a couple of smoke rings, looking up at the ceiling like she was gathering her thoughts. I think she was stalling.

Dr. Cruizie. Please continue.

Regan. Right, right. Anyway, so I got all this debt, right? And I had a hard time getting a job because I don't have a degree. I mean, I have, like, half of three different degrees, and I would always try to tell

interviewers when I went into a job that having half of three different degrees was better than having one whole degree. I mean, do the math, right? Half of three equals one and a half whole degrees. That's the way I see it, anyway.

Dr. Cruizie. The point, Regan. Get to it. Stick to the proper presentation format.

Regan. Yeah. So that's my problem, anyway, I got all this debt and I couldn't get a job. See, the thing is, I would keep going into all these job interviews and all the questions the interviewer would ask me were all about what I would do in *this* or *that* situation or whatever, none of it was about my one and a half degrees, so I kinda thought that maybe me not finishing school wasn't really a bad thing, right?

Dr. Cruizie. I'm sure that's not exactly correct.

Regan. Whatever. Anyway, I never got any of the jobs I tried to get, and you'd think it was because I never finished any degrees, but you'd be wrong if you thought that, because a couple of times people offered me jobs, but I never took them.

In a rare occurrence, a member of group spoke up. Hardly anyone ever asked questions during the presentations, so it surprised everyone, even Dr. Cruizie. Right then I knew there was something different about Regan. She had a way about her, something that attracted everyone's attention in a place where everyone was self-obsessed. Maybe it was star-power, maybe it was the way that she took her time, explaining all the little details, maybe it was because she had such a blatant lack of respect for Dr. Cruizie. I'm not sure, but I felt it, too. It drew us in.

Brown-haired man with dark eyes. Why didn't you take anything? Weren't you worried about ending up in here?

Regan. Sure, Sure, I was worried. Who wants to end up in this hell-hole? I didn't. But I couldn't take anything, man. I mean, you gotta do what you love, right? I didn't want any of the jobs they offered me. They were all crap, stuff that I probably could have got without my one and a half degrees. But that wasn't totally, like, it, man.

She paused a beat here again. Everyone looked uncomfortable. It was obvious to me now that Regan was in complete control over the conversation. She owned it, had stolen it even from the ramrod grasp of stodgy old Dr. Cruizie, which was quite a feat.

Regan. I didn't have time to take a job, man. I had all these job interviews to go to. And, like, job interviews are great. It's a real rush to walk into a place that thinks they got the keys to the kingdom and then you wow the hell outta them and then turn them down. It takes 'em down a peg, you know? A whole stinkin' peg.

Dr. Cruizie looked like he'd had enough. He hemmed and hawed a bit in Regan's direction without directly looking at her. He talked about sticking to the proper presentation format again, but it was obvious he was as enthralled in Regan's presence as the rest of us. Regan continued as if he'd never spoken.

Regan. So I had to keep going to these interviews, man. I had to. I didn't have time for a job.

Regan. So what's next, pops? That's what I'm in for, anyway.

Dr. Cruizie. Your, um, Overcoming Strategies.

Regan. My what? Oh, right. Nerdspeak for how I'm gonna fix it? Sure. Okay. Well, I can't really fix it right now. I mean, I'm stuck in this hole, right? I guess when I get out I'll have to find a job or something, I guess. That's the plan, anyway. Right now I'm just gonna kick back and enjoy this buzz they got us on, man. I mean, what a trip. I been having these crazy dreams, crazy, crazy dreams. It's a real kick, man, a real kick.

Dr. Cruizie. The virus is intended to be a punishment, not a, ahem, "kick."

Regan. Coulda fooled me, man.

Dr. Cruizie. Ah, yes, anyway, Regan, your Personal Encouragement?

Regan laughed at him. She laughed. I don't know how to stress how crazy that is. No one laughs in here. It makes your lungs hurt. Dr. Cruizie flinched.

Regan. What is this, grade school? Aah, whatever. Alright, pops. I guess I'm glad that I'm so awesome. That encourages me. You dig that, pops? You dig that I'm awesome? Coz, man, you know?

With that, she sat down. It took Dr. Cruizie a full thirty seconds to start the next phase of group, handing out Regan's documents so we could all look over them. It astounds me. I don't understand how she got away with all that.

Now I'm definitely eager to talk to her.

The next day after Regan spoke in group I walked behind the chapel and found Tereza and some of the inmates in a straight on conversation (a rare thing) about Regan. Tereza and I's group wasn't the only place she's making waves, it seems. A tired-looking inmate named Chuck, who I recognized from skills training, was speaking when I came around the corner. It seems that Regan had made a scene in one of her classes that morning, declaring the whole thing "a waste of her time."

Although I respect Regan's outlook, I wonder if getting a chance to talk to her is really that good of an idea. She can't go on like this - pretty soon Warden Powers is going to have to schedule an extra date for Regan with Nurse Gunderson's needle, just to maintain order. She's only been here for a few days and is already causing a stir.

My last entry was spot on it seems, but it happened much differently than I thought it would. Today after lunch I got called into Warden Powers' office for a chat. I was practically shivering as I stepped in. His back was turned to me, as usual. I think he does that on purpose, just for the effect.

Warden Powers. Sacha. Do you know why I called you in here?

Me. I've no idea, sir.

Warden Powers. I presume you're aware of our newest inmate, Regan P?

Me. She's in my group with Dr. Cruizie.

Warden Powers. Yes, yes, that's right. Well, I suppose you're also aware then, Sacha, that she's causing quite a stir.

Me. Yes, sir.

Warden Powers. She's an irregular inmate, Sacha – the virus seems to have little effect on her. It could be any number of things, an unusually strong constitution, a powerful ego, I can't really be sure. However, we have other, more drastic measures to take care of problem inmates, but I'm reticent to use them. It could have a poor effect on inmate morale. None of us want that.

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. Of course. You want to know why I called you in here. You see, we both know you've had some problems in the past, Sacha, but you seem to be overcoming them. Although it's our policy to typically discourage inmate fraternization, in this case I think it would behoove everyone for us to make an exception.

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. I'm going to send word around that you and Regan will be allowed certain speaking privileges. It's going to be your job to rein her in. Do your best to acclimate her to the routines and standards of behavior necessary to her success here. Do you think you can handle that, Sacha?

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. Well? Speak up now.

Me. I'll try, sir.

Warden Powers. Good, good. In order to make this easier I'm having her moved to your room. She'll be moving there tonight, after dinner.

Me. Is there anything else, sir?

Warden Powers. No, that'll be all. Dismissed.

Warden Powers. Oh, wait. Sacha, one more thing. You've shown some improvement since your last incident. I hope you'll handle this situation responsibly. You know the consequences if you don't. Dismissed.

That was it. I left his office, a little confused.

So now it's my job to play babysitter, I suppose, despite not yet having met Regan in person.

Just as Warden Powers said, Regan moved in after dinner. I didn't have the time to write anything down after she moved in last night, so I'm doing it now.

She walked through the door in a rush, throwing her bags all over the room in the flurry of activity, disturbing my calm room like a storm. Once she'd flopped down on the other bed she finally spoke.

Regan. So you're in my group, right?

Me. Um.

Regan. Yeah, I knew I recognized you. Man, this place is a trip.

Me. Um.

Regan. Old man Powers told me I should talk to you. I guess he wants you to show me the ropes or something. That guy's a royal drag, you know that? So I'm not gonna worry about it. I figure you're cool, right?

Me. Um.

Regan. You don't talk all that much, huh?

Me. No.

Regan. That's cool, man, I get that, I get that. You cool if I smoke?

Me. That's fine.

Regan. Fantastic.

She started smoking, lying back on her bed, studying the ceiling like all the secrets of the world were written there. Suddenly she sat up in a rush, blowing a plume of smoke in my direction.

Regan. Look, so you been here awhile, right?

Me. Almost two months.

Regan. Right, right, so, you ever hear of anyone flyin' the coop or what?

Me. Um?

Regan. You know, going over the wall, flippin' the bird to this place, man, you know.

Me. Oh.

Me. No.

She lay back down on her bed.

Regan. Coz I got this idea that all the junk about still being sick on the outside, you know how they say it'll kill ya? I think it's all a bunch of BS, with extra emphasis on the S, if you know what I mean.

Me. Yeah, it probably is. I mean, I know that people sometimes...

I bit my tongue, about to tell her about Tereza and Trevor. She sat up again and put her smoke out on the nightstand between our beds, grinding the cherry into the wood.

Regan. What?

Me. Nothing.

Regan. C'mon. We're buds, ya dig? You can tell me.

I don't know why I did it, but I did. Part of me almost wanted to see what a socially destructive person like Regan would do with information like that. Maybe she'd even solve my problem for me – if Trevor got busted I wouldn't be faced with the tough choice he presented me every time I thought about him. I wouldn't have to worry about betraying Jack just because I couldn't take being sick.

I told her all about Trevor and Tereza and the saline syringes. When I was finished with the whole thing, Regan leaned back against her pillows and let out a long, high-pitched whistle.

Regan. Wow.

Regan. Those cheeky bastards.

Regan. Wow.

Me. Yeah.

Regan. So this guy is a real dick, huh? You ever taken him up on his offer?

Me. Me? No. I have someone outside.

Regan. Yeah, but extenuating circumstances, man. Hard times, dig?

Me. It wouldn't matter. My guy, Jack, he's trying to get me out. We might get married.

Regan. I get ya.

Me. Yeah.

We talked for awhile longer, but I got the feeling that Regan's head was someplace else, maybe mulling over the things I'd told her. That's the thing about Regan, her persona is such that it's hard to tell if that's all there is to her or if it's just a cover for something more. It's impossible to tell, really, and that's what makes her so confusing.

Three things happened today, mostly unrelated:

1. I got a postcard from Jack saying he was going to visit me next week with good news.
2. Regan confronted Tereza behind the chapel.
3. Trevor talked to me when I got my booster.

It's weird how some days pass with nothing to write about and then a whole bunch of things all happen at once.

1. Not much more to say about this, nothing hard anyway, just speculation. I wonder what Jack's good news will be? I can't wait to see him again. Maybe we'll be able to spend the whole time together this time - if the warden thinks I'm walking the line well enough to give me greater responsibilities with Regan then Jack should be able to stay the whole visiting hour.

2. I told her it wasn't a good idea, but she wanted to do it. I'm supposed to watch her, but what that's meant so far is mostly just following her around and making excuses for her whenever she gets into trouble. I told her that Tereza and some other inmates hang out behind the chapel over outside time. As soon as the warning that going back there probably wasn't a good idea was out of my mouth, Regan was up off her blanket and heading in the direction of the chapel.

I'm sure guards saw us walk over there, Regan wasn't making any attempt to hide where she was going. If things keep going that way something awful is sure to happen soon.

As we cleared the corner:

Tereza. You. What are you doing here?

Regan. I heard this was where the party is. Was I wrong?

Tereza looked behind Regan to see me cowering behind her. She gave me a nasty look, curling up her bottom lip in a rapid grimace.

Tereza. I should have known.

Regan. Should have known what? Tereza, right?

Tereza. Who wants to know?

Regan. The person asking you. You're in with that Trevor guy, right?

At the mention of Trevor's name the other inmates scattered, leaving me, Regan, and Tereza standing in the shadow of the chapel alone.

Regan. You're his whore, right? You find people for him?

Tereza said nothing, just glared. I don't know why she didn't just leave, but Regan's presence must have kept her there.

Regan. You got a voice, chick? Or you just gonna glare at me?

Now Tereza did turn to leave. She swept past Regan, face flushed, eyes brimming with anger. Before she disappeared around the corner I heard her whisper.

Tereza. You'll be sorry.

Regan and I left soon after. I'm not sure what she meant to accomplish by confronting Tereza and I didn't get a chance to ask. Outside time was over. I hurried to skills training alone. Tereza glared at me the whole time.

3. When I got my booster later that evening after dinner, Trevor slipped into the examining room while I was waiting for Nurse Gunderson. He advanced on me slowly, his hands out in front like he was approaching a wild animal. I backed up on the paper of the examining table, crinkling it under between my fingers. He put a hand on my knee.

Trevor. Still sure you don't want some help? Gunderson's gonna want your shot soon. I can make it easier on you.

He reached up and stroked the side of my face. I recoiled at his touch. His fingers were cool and a little moist against my fever.

Trevor. It'll be real easy.

Me. Um.

Me. No.

Me. Go away.

Trevor. Last chance. You want it after I walk out of this room it'll cost you more.

Me. Go away.

Trevor. Fine. Fine. Your loss.

As he was leaving the room he ran smack into Nurse Gunderson, who was carrying her kit. He slipped past her, mussing up the shoulder of her neon pink scrubs. Nurse Gunderson didn't comment on it, just went through the normal routine, shooting me up like usual.

The sickly rush hit me on the way back to my room, just like it always does. It was comfortingly terrible.

Five days until I get to see Jack again. I'm counting each feverish minute. My mind is whirling with thoughts, wondering what his "good news" will be. I can barely wait, but I've been trying to keep myself steady. Being sick and excited has a nasty interaction, they seem to enhance each other. My stomach is like a blender filled with runny eggs, shells and all.

Everywhere I go with Regan recently causes a scene. She yelled at Mrs. Waterhouse during skills training yesterday, and that was after an equally upsetting morning at group with Dr. Cruizie. I don't understand her bravado. She acts like she doesn't care what happens to her. It's going to get us both in a bad way.

Warden Powers called me into his office again today to talk about Regan. I felt sure, as I was walking in through the office door I've come to know so well, that this was it. He'd heard about Regan and my inability to reel her in and now we were both going to get huge number doses. We'd spend the rest of our time in here in wheelchairs, drooling in the corner. I grit my teeth against bad news when he started to talk.

Warden Powers. Sacha. I seem to be seeing even more and more of you lately. As you can imagine, I'm not excited about that.

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. The task I assigned you, watching over the other inmate, Regan P, it's not going well, is it, Sacha?

Me. It's been difficult, sir.

Me. She's...

I was torn here. It looked like Warden Powers was giving me an out, a way to rat out my new friend for a chance to save my own skin. I feel like everyone's been giving me that chance lately – Warden Powers, Trevor, okay, so maybe only two people, but that's enough to notice a trend, at least in my book.

Warden Powers. Yes?

I chose to stand by her.

Warden Powers. Well?

Me. She's just getting used to being here, sir. She's getting better, I promise.

Warden Powers. That may be, but I haven't seen it. You better get her under control, Sacha. From here on in I'm holding you personally responsible for her behavior. Is that understood?

I was certain would be hear the audible gulp I sent down my sore throat, but he didn't respond.

Me. Um, sir.

Warden Powers. Good. Dismissed.

I stumbled out of his office, my stomach sick with worry.

So there's that. With Jack's visit looming so close, I have to get Regan to calm down. I can't miss the whole time with him again. I need to see him. His visit is the only thing keeping me going in here, through all the sickness, the daily ennui, the awful company. Enshrined in my head is a mental picture of Jack, dressed in a grey suit with a bright red tie. He's waving to me from across a deep green field of grass and wild flowers. It's the day I'm to be released. I can see it in my mind and I'm holding it there, clinging to it like a prisoner on death row clings to the bars of his cell as they try to haul him away to the chair.

God, I need to get Regan under control.

I don't know what to do. Regan is getting worse and worse. It almost came to blows between her and Tereza today at dinner. I've tried talking to Regan, but she won't listen. I've told her about double and triple dosing, but she doesn't seem to care, which is odd, because she's been showing signs that the virus is affecting her in a bad way. All day long she's been grabbing her stomach. She convinced Dr. Cruzie to let her out of group a few minutes early today because she was going to throw up. I asked Regan about it a few minutes ago:

Regan. It's cool, man. No biggie. I just couldn't listen to that windbag spout off any more of his nazi-crap. This whole place is a real drag, man. I gotta get something done, feel me? I gotta get out of here in a bad way.

Me. Please, please, just calm down. I've tried all that already, you can't do anything. Just chill out and play it cool, please. You're going to get us both triple-dosed and they'll suspend my right to have visitors. Please, Regan, calm down, for me.

Regan. Oh, they won't do that to me, don't worry about me. I won't let them. I've had it with this place and all their lame rules. I'm out, I swear to god. I'm out. They won't touch me with that needle again.

Me. I thought the virus didn't bother you?

Regan. You gotta play it so you're in control, man. You should know that. But I'm done playing their game. It's over, man, Oh-ver.

Me. Regan, please...

It went on like that, but she wouldn't listen to me. I'm at my wits end. Something bad is going to happen and it looks like I'm powerless to stop it. Because of what she said, I'm really worried about tomorrow. Regan's booster is in the afternoon. I've got to figure out some way to calm her down before then, or the next entry I write will probably be from the infirmary.

God, what am I going to do?

All my fears and more were realized after last night's entry, except one. I'm not writing this entry from the infirmary. That's the only boon I have right now.

I don't even know where to start.

Regan's appointment with Nurse Gunderson was today, after dinner. I don't know exactly what happened because I wasn't there, but from what I heard it was the worst thing that could have happened.

When Nurse Gunderson came in with her kit to give Regan her booster, Regan freaked out and started bouncing all over the room to get away from her. I heard she even threw a glass container of tongue depressors at Nurse Gunderson before she knocked her down and ran out of the med office.

They caught her at the fence, trying her best to scale it in her hospital slippers, her feet and fingers raw against the metal. They pulled her down and dragged her back to the office, screaming, where they gave her a triple dose. No one knows what happened to her after that. I haven't seen her all day. She hasn't been back to our room.

I don't know what I'm going to do. An aide from Warden Powers' office told me to go see him after dinner tonight and I'm sure he's going to punish me for what Regan did. Jack comes in just a few days and I don't know if I'm going to be able to meet him. Even if they let me see him, I'm sure I'm going to be almost comatose with the dose they give me.

How could things get any worse?

I just got back from seeing Warden Powers:

Warden Powers. Sacha. I imagine you know why you're here.

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. Speak up.

Me. Yes, sir.

Warden Powers. You've heard about Regan's behavior yesterday, then.

Me. Just rumors, sir.

Warden Powers. Then let me fill you in. The inmate you were supposed to be watching, whom you told me in our last meeting was getting better, assaulted Nurse Gunderson at her weekly booster appointment. Nurse Gunderson has a black eye. She had to be treated in the infirmary. If that wasn't atrocious enough, Regan proceeded out of the medical facility and was found by the guards trying to scale the North fence. Never in my years as warden here has any inmate ever acted so rashly.

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. You don't seem surprised by her behavior, Sacha.

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. She was your responsibility, and you'll face the consequences. Let me lay out for you what's going to happen. I've told you before that we had consequences beyond multiple doses as punishment.

Me. Um.

Warden Powers. So don't worry, you're going to get multiple doses. Don't you worry your little head about that. Report to Nurse Gunderson first thing tomorrow morning to see to it.

I gulped.

Warden Powers. But that isn't all. It isn't punishment enough. It doesn't even begin to chisel away at the tip of the iceberg this outrage has caused. I'm going to recommend to the board your sentence be increased by a period of six months.

Me. No! You can't do that!

Warden Powers. I can do that, and I'm going to. Furthermore, your creditors will be happy to learn that I'm increasing your debt to them by twenty-percent, so when your time is finished here, you'll be working for them a bit longer than you first thought. That's the price you pay for misbehavior, Sacha.

Me. No, you can't...

Warden Powers. Protests will get you nowhere.

He looked down at his notes.

Warden Powers. Oh, and one more thing. After your initial multiple dose tomorrow morning you'll receive double doses for the remainder of your time here. That should teach you to be more responsible.

Me. But...

Warden Powers. Do you have anything to say for yourself?

I didn't know what to say. I was stunned into silence, unable to even muster a simple "um."

Warden Powers. Good. Now, when Regan is released back into the general area of the prison, you are not to speak to her, you understand? You two only seem to encourage each others' bad behavior. Don't let me catch you fraternizing with her or you'll get another six months. Clear?

I managed a small twitch of my neck. Warden Powers took it as a nod.

Warden Powers. Good. Don't forget to report to Nurse Gunderson in the morning. Dismissed.

I left his office barely able to walk. I'm not sure how I was able to write all this. At least he didn't take Jack away from me. That's all I have to say right now.

I can't sleep. This is the first time I've ever tried to write in the middle of the night, but there's almost enough light coming in through the window, from the lights out in the yard. I can pretty much see, though it won't surprise me if I find mistakes in this later.

It's unsettling to be sleeping alone in my room again. I'd gotten used to Regan's breathing at night. It was almost comforting.

With only a few hours to go before I have to report to Nurse Gundersen for a multiple dose, I'm wracked with fear. Last time I got multiple does it was a triple shot, and I can't help but think that triple is going to look like a walk in the park compared to what she'll shoot me up with in the morning. I had hallucinations last time, I barely wrote at all that week, I was so stricken with sickness. My stomach rolled over and over on itself, flip-flopping bile up through my guts. My head ached, I felt disconnected from everything, even basic reality. I don't know if I can let that happen again, but I don't know what to do.

If they let Jack come after they multiple dose me I'm going to be a wreck when he gets here. I don't know what his "good news" is, but the only real project I know he was working on was a way to get me out with marriage. There's no way he'd want to marry me if I was whacked out of my gourd with the virus. I can't let that happen. He can't see me like that.

The thing is, there's only one way I know to prevent it and I hate to be that selfish. Jack's doing his best to save me. I can't betray him. Oh, god, I just don't know what to do, and the morning is marching toward me.

If only I'd done better at getting a job, or gotten a better major, or...something. I wouldn't be in this awful mess, struggling between the choice of betraying my lover or being so sick he'll want to abandon me. I should have done better. I should have done better. I should have done better. God, god, god.

Everything's on its way now, and I feel powerless to stop it. Please, Jack, forgive me.

I hope he doesn't hate me. I didn't know what else to do.

Trevor slipped into the examining room as I was waiting for Nurse Gunderson. I was sick both with worry and the virus.

Trevor. You look awful, Sacha. But that's nothing compared to how you're gonna look after old lady Gunderson gets in here. Guess what? She told me to prepare a huge dose for you. It's gonna suck to be you in a few minutes.

I gulped.

Me. How many?

Trevor. Six, baby. Six. I've never seen someone get a dose that big. Most I've ever seen is five, and that guy was in a coma for two weeks. After he came out he could barely even remember his name and he was a big guy. I can't even imagine what's going to happen to you.

Me. Oh my god.

Trevor. Yup. Now, I could have helped you out, if you hadn't been so rude to me, but it's too late. You're just gonna have to take your medicine. Good luck.

Trevor made for the door. I launched myself at him, clinging to his knees, screaming at him that he couldn't go, he just couldn't let them do that to me, please, please, please. Trevor looked down at me. A combined look of pity and glee rolled across his face. My stomach lurched.

Trevor. Well? What's it gonna be?

Me. I'll...I'll do what you want.

Trevor. Good.

He locked the door. You can guess what happened next, I can't go into details. At least he was quick. God, it was awful. When he was finished he slipped out of the door.

Trevor. I'll see what I can do. No promises.

I threw up in the sink. The burning acidity of stomach fluid was only slightly better than the rancid filth he'd left in my mouth.

Fifteen minutes later Nurse Gunderson came in with her kit. She sniffed the air once, made a disapproving face, but said nothing. Five

minutes later I was walking to morning classes, expecting to suddenly pass out when the virus hit me. All I got was a headache.

I guess that bastard came through. Now I have no one to blame but myself.

Another two days gone by and still no sign of Regan. I'm not sure right now if I'd hug her or kill her.

Still no mention of Jack's visit. It looks like I'll be able to see him. He's coming the day after tomorrow. I hate feeling like this. I was looking forward to him coming so much. Now I'm sick with dread. My stomach aches, and it isn't just from the virus.

I've been doing my best to look desperately ill whenever I see Warden Powers or Nurse Gunderson. I can't let them know that I don't feel as bad as I'm pretending to, at least not physically. I don't know how I'm going to be able to face Jack like this.

I sent Jack a postcard today telling him not to come. I can't even look at myself in the mirror, there's no way I'll be able to look into his eyes while he proposes, knowing all the while in the back of my mind what I did to him. He'll still be coming, though. There's no way my postcard will reach him in time. I just have this bad feeling that something terrible is going to happen when he gets here. At least, afterwards, he'll have a postcard from me telling him that I wished he hadn't come. It won't make any difference, but maybe it'll help him understand I had no choice.

Jack came to visit me today. There's nothing I can say by way of introduction. Here goes.

When I walked into the visitation room Jack was already seated at a table in the center of the room. A huge smile on his face popped up the moment he saw me.

Jack. Sacha. You look wonderful.

Me. I don't. I look a mess, Jack. It's great to see you.

I sat down next to him and grabbed his hand under the table. He looked amazing. His brown hair was parted on the left side of his head, not a hair out of place. He was wearing his grey suit, my favorite on him. It was hard for me to look at his face, so I kept my gaze on his tiepin, a little blue gem in a silver setting.

Jack. Sacha, I have great news. I've been talking to your credit agency. They're going to let me repay your loans if we get married. I've already made the arrangements. Next week Father McKormick is going to meet us here to arrange the documents. I have the first loan payment check all made out already. I should be able to take you home. Next week, Sacha!

Me. That's great news.

Jack. There's one little problem, though, something I'll have to work out with the credit agency, it looks like they made an error collecting the numbers of your debt, it looks about twenty percent higher than we thought it was, but I'm sure it's just an error. I'll get it worked out this week. Everything's going to be okay.

I couldn't look at him. I knew why my debt was twenty-percent higher. It was my fault. Jack squeezed my hand under the table. I knew what was coming next. I braced myself for it.

Jack. There's only one thing left to take care of.

He got stood up off his chair and got down on one knee next to me, my hands in his. I felt my stomach rise up into my throat. My head swam.

Jack. Sacha, will you marry me?

Everything after that seemed to happen in a blurred whirl of activity. Before I could get out my meager reply, I looked up over Jack's shoulder and saw movement. Tereza was standing behind Jack with a dour look on her face. A young man behind her was half-up from another table, calling to her.

When she spoke my heart dropped to the floor. She stepped on it, grinding it into pretty little bits under her cardboard hospital slippers.

Tereza. Why would you want to marry someone like Sacha? You don't know, do you? About the guy Sacha's been cheating on you with?

Jack froze, my hands still in his. He looked up at me, searching my eyes, begging me to refute Tereza's accusations. I looked at the floor.

Jack. Ah, what?

Tereza. That's right. With a guy in the med building. His name's Trevor. You should hear about the things they do together.

I glared up at Tereza.

Me. How...how could you?

Tereza didn't answer me. She walked back to her table laughing. The young man waiting for her looked confused.

Jack. Sacha, is it true?

I didn't say anything. There wasn't anything I could say. The damage was already done. I felt my vision of a perfect life with Jack evaporate like so much tap water.

Jack stood up, dropping my hands.

Jack. I...uh, Sacha, I gotta think this over. I...I can't stay here.

Me. No, Jack, wait, I can explain, it's not what you think.

But he was already gone.

So that's that. My life is over. Everything is ruined. If only I had stayed resolute, true to Jack. God. Please. I can't handle this anymore. This debt, this sickness.

God, what have I done?

I've haven't been able to get out of bed for three days after collapsing in Dr. Cruizie's group. He's written me a waiver to stay in my room, and Warden Powers signed off on it. Everyone seems to think that I'm so sick because of the multiple virus dose they think they gave me. No one knows the real reason.

I got a letter from Jack today. Here it is:

Sacha,

I'm sorry I left so suddenly. I just...I got home and your postcard telling me not to come was waiting for me. I guess I know why you didn't want me to come. Don't worry, Sacha, I'm not angry, I guess I understand why you did it, being alone in there without any friends.

I hope you'll understand why I can't go through with my original plan to get you out of there. I need some time to think. Maybe we can still go through with it in six months, maybe a year, but I need some time alone right now. I'm sorry.

I'll keep working to see if there's another way I can get you out of there. Maybe there's something I overlooked.

Sincerely,
Jack

There isn't anything left to say about that. I messed up everything with Jack by paying Trevor's price. There isn't anyone I can talk to about this. Only these writings have kept me from doing something worse. I mean, I never thought I was the type to think about...well, but I guess I am. There really aren't any other options at this point. Jack's gone. My friend's are all gone, and I still have this debt, this sickness, and it's all hanging over my head like the glistening blade of a guillotine.

That's it. I'm finished. I'm made my choice. It'll just take me a few days to get what I need.

I've been up from my bed for the last few days. Dr. Cruzie, Nurse Gunderson, Mrs. Waterhouse, and Warden Powers all seem amazed at my sudden recovery. If only they knew that it was all just a ruse in the first place.

The real sickness I feel now isn't in my body. It's someplace deeper inside. That conversation that Jack and I had, the first time he came to see me? It's like that. I feel like I am encapsulated in a silence that rushes out from me. In the quiet I can hear my heart beating. It pounds like the thunder of my aching head and there's nothing I can do to escape it.

Except for one thing.

My preparations are going slower than I expected.

Regan reappeared today. I need to find a chance to talk to her alone, to tell her everything. Maybe she could pull me back from the edge.

I got a chance to talk to Regan alone this afternoon. I'm not sure what they did to her, but she's been subdued almost beyond all recognition. She barely raises her eyes above the ground, and did her best to avoid speaking to me. I finally cornered her behind the chapel. She tried to leave, but I kept her with a hand around her bicep.

There's a yellowing bruise over her left eye.

Me. Where have you been? I need you, I've been looking all over. What did they do to you?

Regan. Please, leave me alone. Let me go.

Me. No. Tell me what they did to you. You're the reason I'm in this horrid mess, the least you can tell me is what I paid for.

Regan. Mess?

I explained to her what happened with Trevor, Tereza, and Jack. She looked upset at first, then almost apologetic.

Regan. I'm sorry. This is all my fault.

Me. Damn right it is. What did they do to you?

Regan. Kept me sedated for a few days. Warden Powers talked to me for awhile. Nothing I couldn't handle.

Me. Oh yeah? That's why you're such a mouse? That can't be all.

Regan didn't say anything, just shrugged off my hand on her arm.

Me. So that's it then? I went through all that because of you.

Regan. Look, I'm sorry, okay? I didn't know you'd get in trouble.

Me. It wasn't trouble. It's much worse than that.

Regan. What do you want me to say?

Me. Nothing. After all I did for you, I warned you over and over, and now I have to pay for it.

Regan. Don't worry.

Me. What?

Regan. I'll get her back for you.

Me. Who?

Regan. Tereza.

With that, Regan left without a word. I followed her out from behind the chapel, bellowing at her to stop, I didn't want her to just mess things

up for me even more, but she wouldn't stop. Finally a guard yelled at me to pipe down. I did.

I have no idea what's going to happen. Whatever Regan has planned, it can't be good. This is only going to make things worse, if they can get worse, mark my words.

This might be my last entry. I can hear them banging on my door already. I filled the lock with broken paper clips before I shut it behind me, so I have to write fast. I just need to get all this down before they get in. Hurry, Sacha, hurry.

Regan assaulted Tereza and beat the hell out of her. We were standing in the hallway waiting for the cafeteria doors to open so we could go to dinner when Regan saw Tereza come in from outside. Regan left my side and ran up to Tereza before pulling back and just letting Tereza have it. She was scratching and pulling Tereza's hair, yelling at her the whole time. Everyone started shouting like crazy, I jumped into the middle of it to try to pull them apart but got socked in the eye by one of the guards. My eye is swollen shut. I can't see out of it.

In the confusion Tereza and Regan were still howling at each other when Warden Powers showed up looking pissed. He saw me. He must have known it was all my fault. One of the guards had his hands around my middle, keeping me back from the fight.

The warden seemed to piece everything together from Tereza and Regan's yells, Trevor's name got dropped and Regan was yelling about Tereza being Trevor's whore. The last thing I saw was a shocked grimace go over Warden Powers' face before I kicked my heel up into the crotch of the guard who was holding me. Then I just ran. I didn't look back, just sprinted away as fast as my sore legs could carry me.

Before I shut my door I made sure they wouldn't get in right away with the paper clips. I was holding them for you know what. I guess they were useful after all.

I can hear them fiddling with the lock. It won't be long now. I just have to finish this and hide it before they come in. God, everything is such a mess.

Just let me get this out. Please. Someone! They're coming for me and I don't know what I'm going to do.

Jack, I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you with any of this. I never meant to borrow so much and get so much debt and I'm sorry they made

me sick. I just want this to be over. I can't take any of this anymore. My head is pounding from running here. My stomach is in knots. God, I-

PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION

RED GROVE INPATIENT FACILITY, RED GROVE FINANCIAL PENITENTIARY

PATIENT. Sacha Winters

CASE NO. 5258.15

SECTION. 37

OVERSEEING PHYSICIAN. Dr. Edward Cruizie

DATE. October 10th, 2017

SUMMARY. A preliminary report on the psychological state of patient Sacha Winters, with preference to certain debilitating delusions held by said patient. Recommendation inconclusive. More observation is needed.

REPORT. Patient Sacha Winters was found yesterday after an hour spent locked behind a closed door. The patient was found crouched in the corner, rocking back and forth and mumbling. After several attempts to rouse the patient from this state, she was brought to my office. I attempted to rouse her via physical and pharmaceutical (234B, 152C5f) stimuli, but was unable to elicit a response. I ordered bedrest and observation.

As is standard procedure, a search was conducted of the patient's room and personal belongings. Therein a series of documents were found, written in the manner of a personal journal, detailing a specific and intricate set of delusions held by the patient. As evidenced by the writings found in her room, the patient seems to believe that many of the staff and inmates of RED GROVE wish her harm. The patient also seems to believe that many of the violent and subversive actions done by her in the last few months at RED GROVE have been not her own doing. Instead, the patient has created an alter ego, referred to in her the writings simply as "Regan" or in a few cases "Regan P." Of course there is no such inmate here at RED GROVE.

In the patient's writings, Regan at times seems to provide a mental scapegoat for the patient's own subversive and violent actions. In one entry Regan is outspoken and brash, speaking words that I myself heard the patient utter in group therapy. In another entry the patient tells Regan the story of what seems to be a sexual encounter between the

patient and a medical aide by the name of Trevor Ginger. In the account left by the patient it seems as though she believes Mr. Ginger was the aggressive instigator of this encounter. The patient's writings give no hint as to the actual occurrence, a brutal sexual assault that Mr. Ginger is still recovering from.

Aside from the creation of the character Regan to cover the patient's own awkward and sometimes violent behavior, the patient also skews and warps many of the daily routines and activities that happen at RED GROVE, most notably the virus injections given to inmates. At no time are inmates every given more than a single dose of the virus, though in the patient's writings she seems to think otherwise.

The patient also makes a few references to a young lover named Jack through the writings, whom she would lead the reader to believe has been a romantic acquaintance for some time and lived with the patient before her admittance into RED GROVE. At no time was the patient visited by anyone by the name of "Jack" and after a cursory check with the patient's immediate family, Jack does not seem to exist. I've checked into the patient's financial records and found a promising lead, however. The young man who worked with the patient as a credit advisor at LEAD WESTERN FINANCIAL was named Jack French. At this time, more research is needed, but it seems as though the patient has largely exaggerated and distorted any relationship they may have had.

At this time I'm reticent to recommend any treatment for the patient other than observation. A detailed study of the patient's writings will also be needed to be done before any further evaluation can be begun.

SIGNED AND DATED. Dr. Edward Cruizie, October 10, 2017.

Oh, the most wonderful thing happened today! Jack came to get me! He whisked me up into his arms and married me on the spot. He said he knew I was sorry for everything I did and he said that everything was going to be okay. No more sickness and no more debt and everything is going to be okay. He still loves me. We left so suddenly I didn't have time to say goodbye to Regan but I'm sure she'll understand.

I'm so, so very happy!

I can't wait to start my new life with Jack!

Author's Note:

If you read my novella and have something to say about it, praise, criticism, or comments please email me at valentineclouds@gmail.com or hit me up on my site, <http://mispeled.net> and let me know. I'd like to hear what you have to say. I'm especially interested in an indie film version of *Neither a Borrower*. I think it would be an interesting candidate for an artistic film, so I especially welcome inquires that.

I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you.

Special thanks: Angela Sels, Michael Trotter, Regan Pepples

From the same author on Feedbooks

The Canoe (2009)

The Canoe is a nonfiction story about a group of brothers and their misadventures on a lake one summer in Maine.

Waiting (2009)

Waiting is a story about a guy named Jack who returns to the small town he grew up in, ten years after he left. He's returning to attend an ex-girlfriend's wedding, but that's not the real reason. And he knows it. He's just sick of waiting.

Time to Get Up (2009)

A short story about a young man goes with his mother to bail his kid sister out of jail.

Disappearances (2010)

Disappearances tells the story of a young man mentally disconnected. Early one morning he's awoken from a restless sleep by a plane crash outside his apartment window. Rushing down to the scene, the young man is unable to find anyone – no people, no rescue workers, no survivors. He is alone. Everyone he loves, everyone else on the planet as far as he knows, has disappeared.

The young man sets off on a journey through the deserted landscape of America and his own memories that taxes him both physically and mentally. After months of searching, the young man finally finds one man, a grizzled old guide named Frank. It is with Frank, sitting by a fireside in an Arizona canyon, that the true test begins.

Frank's task is to listen to the young man's story, help him discover the secrets behind the disappearance of everyone he loves, and most importantly, to reconnect the young man with the rest of the human race. But before the young man can do that, he needs to learn the most important lessons about himself, his father, and how to move forward with his life.

Venn Diagram (2010)

Venn Diagram is a short story about a guy who can't reconcile the two most important areas of his life.

Madeline's Children (2010)

Madeline's Children is a short story about a scientist named Noah who clones his wife's DNA to create little girl super-soldiers. His wife is livid.

perpetual autumn (2010)

Perpetual Autumn is a short story about a couple who transition into space-time 6. They have all the time in the universe together. And yet...there is despair.



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