

Sick Days

By
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No one I knew had ever called in sick. No one I knew had ever known anyone who had *been* sick. Yet, I stared at Shel's blotchy face and too-bright eyes on the telecam. She glowed strangely, almost wetly. I touched the screen. "You look terrible!"

"I know!" She smiled. "It's amazing, isn't it?"

"What is it?"

"Measles," she told me, leaning in so I could get a better look. "Everybody's getting it 'round here. Haven't you had it?"

"Er...no," I admitted. "Does it hurt?"

"Not exactly. It's a weird feeling. I had a high fever yesterday." She touched her inflamed skin.

I cringed, but realized I was intrigued. "Where did you get it?"

A few days later, I found myself on Corporation Road looking for a supposedly thriving office among the unmarked warehouses, dodgy repair shops, and fences topped by barbed wire. I spied Central Station, all the windows broken, and, on the other side of the street, the old terraced hotels fashionable back when the railways operated. Then, I saw the grubby plate on Number 59:

*D McCabe, MD
Catering to all kinds of sickness
® Restorin Registered*

Ringling the bell, I saw the CCTV light blink on and smiled nervously into the lens. "Shel sent me."

The lock clicked. I pushed the door open and entered a foyer brilliantly lit with illegal incandescent bulbs. I waited for someone to appear, feeling a bit queasy, but trying to savour it. That's what it was all about, right?

When no one appeared immediately, I leafed through some well-thumbed medical encyclopaedias on a side table, amazed at the sicknesses people used to suffer. I heard footsteps and looked up into the face of a monster.

"Come in!" It had a woman's voice.

I stared.

"Don't pay any attention to this tumour. The doctor's working on it." She gestured me forward. "Come, we haven't got all day."

The surgery resembled an old science fiction movie set, all pristine white and shiny stainless steel.

The doctor's monkish semi-baldness had been fashionable a few years ago. "Ah, Alyssa, isn't it? You haven't visited us before, have you? You must be in excellent health!" He laughed.

I'd never seen anyone actually wearing spectacles. The lenses flashed with weird reflections and I couldn't tell the colour of his eyes.

“Er, yes.” I looked away, distracted by so many unfamiliar objects. Antique public health posters, some of which were truly disturbing, lined the walls. *Don't die of ignorance*. What was that about?

“Don't be alarmed at this set-up. Many of my clients like the retro look.” He settled himself beside me, pulling a hinged table closer. A cabinet swung open, revealing rows of vials. “Ever had anything before?”

“I nearly had a cold once. Caught it from someone else, but...”

“Restorin did the trick, eh? The cure for everything. ‘Don't get sick! Don't get old! There's no need to catch a cold!’” He sang the old playground rhyme. “Well, Alyssa, what can I do for you today?”

The injection didn't hurt much. He said he didn't have to use the needle, but his clients usually preferred it. Part of the experience. Exiting into the dull evening light, I already felt different, my breath quickening. Dr. McCabe had said the sickness would take effect in a few days. I couldn't wait to see Shel's face.

I booked a week off work. The StatCentre was quite flexible about leave.

“Going anywhere nice?” asked Sam. “Have you tried Cuba4? It's wicked.”

“Yeah!” said Lu. “That guitar player at the theme night half way through. Wow! The things he'll do! I can give you some shortcuts.”

“Oh, I don't know.” I shrugged. “It's a bit...samey, isn't it? It's not like you're really there.”

“Really there?” Lu laughed. “With insects and no one speaking your language and buses that don't turn up and bad food and lumpy beds.... Shall I go on?”

Sam nodded. “And anyway, you can't *really* go to Cuba anymore, not after what the Yanks did. It'll take decades to clean up.”

“Anyway,” I said, “Shel's been there, so I have to do something better.”

Sam shook his head. “It must be hard always trying to outdo your best friend! So, come on, Alyssa, what *are* you going to do?”

“I'll tell you later,” I whispered, noting the cam light on. “We should get back to work.”

Two days later I woke up scratching. My head banged. I reached for the thermostat controls. The temperature seemed too high, but it was at the regulation level. My breath quickened, coming in hot blasts. I staggered to the bathroom, splashed myself with cold water, and looked in the mirror.

Spots! Hundreds of raised, red pustules with creamy centres dotted my face, neck, chest, arms, everywhere. They itched like crazy. I'd already broken the surface of one and it seeped yellow pus. I almost heaved, and reached for the Restorin to calm my stomach before remembering I wasn't supposed to take it. That's what it was all about.

I staggered back to bed, the sheets still damp where my body had leaked real perspiration. The ambient systems hummed with the effort of equalising the humidity. I lay on my back, trying not to scratch and listing the unfamiliar sensations: waves of heat, fatigue, the itching, dry mouth, my panic. Everything exactly as advertised. Lie back and enjoy it, I told myself.

To be honest, I felt really rough. Dr. McCabe said I was imagining it — he had bred out those aspects of the disease. Still, I stayed indoors for 48 hours before I even called Shel.

She screamed when she saw me. “You cow! What did you get?”

“Chicken pox.”

“Chicken pox?” She squealed, hurting my ears. “I don’t believe you. There’s no such thing!”

“Yes there is. Look it up. I went for it because of the name. It’s mad, isn’t it?” I was quite proud of my sickness now. “Major itchiness, though.”

I could see she was researching it on the Net as we talked.

“Wow! A pox!” She looked at me. “Did you read the full thing?”

“No, just what the doc gave me.”

Her finger moved across the screen. “It says you can scratch them and then you’ll have scars if you want...until the next time you take the big R. You can’t choose where, of course.... Anyway, I’m very impressed with you, ‘Lyss, but what are you doing moping at home? You should be out showing off!”

I texted Sam and Lu to meet me for a drink, selecting Brooklyn’s because the people there were hip enough to appreciate my efforts. Some places, the square ones, just wouldn’t have understood, probably wouldn’t have let me in.

I glanced around the club full of beautiful, perfect people. No surprises. I remembered learning at school about an age when only highly-paid movie stars were beautiful and perfect. Before Restorin, the faultless health and appearance we now took for granted was achieved only with lots of money, painful operations, or impossibly good luck. In those days, the beautiful and perfect were elevated to god-like status. When Restorin emerged, it was incredibly expensive. People who needed it couldn’t afford it and those who had it tried to horde it. In the end, the government had to distribute it for free.

It cured everything from the slightest headache to the worst injuries and diseases. Restorin made us the best we could be without side effects, disorders, or deformities. It even regenerated body parts. Now, the houses and streets, shops and offices, schools and theatres, detention centres and doss houses all contained only beautiful, perfect people.

Sam and Lu appeared and we pushed our way into Brooklyn’s.

“Let her through. She’s contagious!” shouted Lu.

The crowd separated. I noted approving glances from the other trendies, one or two of whom were sporting scary-looking skin diseases. Other people gasped and reached reflexively for their Restorin.

Sam had waded though to the bar and back, handing us a couple of fluorescent shots.

I heard Shel. I couldn’t wait for her to see me. “Shel!” I called and she turned, her face plum purple.

“Lyss! Hi! I thought yours was a bit tame, so I went for enhanced rosacea. It changes colour when I drink!”

“It’s fabulous!” I said brightly, cursing her under my breath.

I went straight back to Dr. McCabe, of course. He recommended special edition jaundice and goitres, but Shel countered with a combination of alopecia and psoriasis. She caused a commotion at work when everyone saw her bald head, the skin crusted and flaking. I tried a tumour like the one Dr. McCabe’s nurse had, but Shel’s was twice as big.

“I’m desperate, Doc!” I said on my next visit. “What have you got that’s really spectacular?”

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Well, I've invented a new, fast-acting leprosy. It was considered the most feared of ancient diseases. It's very disfiguring, but completely painless."

"Why was it the most feared?"

"Bits of you drop off."

"Perfect!" I clapped my hands. This would show her!

He explained that leprosy commonly developed over years, decades, but he had created a strain so rapid that the disfiguration was almost visible.

I timed my entrance perfectly at the new, hip scene O-Zone. My skin had started to decay as I arrived. By the time I sat down, it was sloughing off, keeping the tiny nanobots busy Hoovering up whole sheets falling off my arms. When I waved to someone, my right index finger fell off. Time to find Shel.

I trawled the bar for her, leaving two of my left toes behind as I walked around in my strappy sandals. I lapped up the attention, savoring the widened eyes, the gasps, the retching sounds. Wait until Shel saw this!

Sam was chatting up a girl near the bar. He'd had epilepsy a week ago, a big hit on the dance floor. "Your mate's over there!" he shouted, nodding toward a group of people swaying under flashing laser lights.

I smiled too broadly and lost my nose. I kicked it off the dance floor and saw some guy in black boots stomp it flat. Yes, my big appearance! I couldn't wait to see her face when she saw mine!

In the centre of this crowd, Shel gyrated on the floor to some drum 'n' bass oldie. Everyone cheered, but they weren't gazing at her face. She had gone and had both legs amputated. Bitch!

I groaned and covered my face with both hands. The ridge above my nasal cavity was sharp and I accidentally sliced all the fingers off my left hand. Plus, my left eye popped out of its socket. Being sick was hard work.