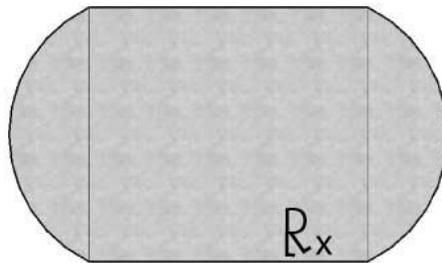


Asylum Smokes

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

On a frigid fall morning out on the grounds of the South Border Regional Mental Health Centre, Jimmy P., a patient in the Horticultural Recovery Program, stumbles across an old asylum brick while troweling a hole for garlic bulb planting. As he detaches the brick from the dense humus ground, he finds a pack of smokes concealed underneath, surely hidden by an internee within a locked unit nearby. Jimmy proceeds to open the pack of Belle Milds and notices a small crumpled up piece of stationery amid the 6 or 7 'fire sticks' inside. Feeling both curious and slightly nosy, he unfolds the small sheet of paper and notices a message that reads: "*I want OUT!*" and signed "*Dorothea*". Directly underneath the short message is a drawing of a pill-shaped capsule with a lower case "x" at its margins and what appears to be the letter "R" next to it. This initially leads him to believe that the cryptic message is related to unit medication with the circular shape being a pill and the "Rx" alluding to mandatory prescription drugs.



Pill-shaped drawing, South Border Regional Mental Health Centre

After making the unexpected discovery, Jimmy puts the small sheet back into the pack of smokes and covers it again with the same brick. He then continues with his bulb planting in a different location a foot or two away within the same garden bed.

The following morning, a patient named Faebian exits Unit D with his new-found ground privileges. After leaving the confines of his locked temporary hospice, he takes a long descent on the unit stairwell and exits through the main doors at ground level. Once outside, Faebian feels the chill of fall air in his lungs and heads straight to the community garden. He looks for a small patch of withered Bergamot where the old asylum brick and his pack of smokes were hidden away. After lifting up the brick which detaches surprisingly easily from the frosty ground, he grabs his pack of smokes and opens them to find his cigarettes and the message that his friend Dorothea had left under his door before she disappeared from the north-facing ladies side of Unit D. After feeling a little puzzled again when reading the same scrap sheet of paper, Faebian lights a cigarette as he heads to the smoking designated area a few yards away from the community garden, to satisfy his craving for fiery nicotine-laced tobacco. Half way through the slim and slender smoke cylinder, Faebian looks out into the distance and could not believe how much his life had changed since he began to feel mentally unstable within his housing project at Main St. and Line Ave. some six months prior.

Now a thirty-year-old site internee with recent ground privileges, he found himself constantly longing for the oxtail rotis and island beats from his old part of town, known as 'Rasta-Town', which was quite a long commute northeast from the mental health site's downtown location. After inhaling a last puff of his asylum smokes, Faebian encounters a fellow nurse from Unit D and nods to say hello.

"You seen Dorothea?" Faebian enquires in a thick Jamaican twang.

"Last I heard, she been discharged." The Caribbean male nurse answers slightly nonchalantly.

"You sure? I thought you need to get ground privileges first. She just arrived in D two weeks ago. Faebian replies in a skeptical tone of voice.

"Guess her case changed or something. Lots of turnover in Unit D. People are in and out of the place like in the subway system." The nurse with short braided dreadlocks adds.

"All I know is that she was pretty worked up about something on the ladies side almost a week ago and I haven't seen her since." Faebian continues with concern in his voice. Feeling overwhelmed and troubled about losing contact with his friend Dorothea, Faebian walks back to the community garden after flicking the cigarette stub into a small receptacle. Waving back at the nurse in the distance upon reaching the garden bed, he stoops over and conceals the pack of cigarettes, making sure to take out the small message contained within it once the brick is laid atop again. Still suspicious that Dorothea hadn't been discharged but had somehow vanished, Faebian walks to the hospital's 'Admin Annex', located at the far west corner of the grounds, to speak with the friendly site archivist with whom he had quite a good rapport. After going one floor down by elevator, Faebian knocks three times on the familiar door as his jovial friend opens up the door with just a crack at first and feeling reassured, invites Faebian in.

Inside the room are a series of maps and plans from recent site re-buildings and reconstructions, along with portraits of asylum staff and head psychiatrists of different eras. One particular portrait directly facing the door shows a man with a monocle and a stern countenance with big bushy eyebrows. Underneath it is written: "Dr. Vladimir Wimsley, Site Superintendent (1924)"

"Hello Mr. Faebian! How can I help you today?" The cheery man with a rosy complexion, bright blue eyes and silver hair at the sides of his slightly balding head asks.

"I wanted to show you something a patient friend of mine on Unit D left me five days ago before she disappeared. They say she was discharged but I don't believe it." Faebian says as his eyes wander around the room capturing quick views of all of the exhibited portraiture and arcane mapping.

"Let me see the message." The archivist says, reaching into his front chest pocket to gather his reading spectacles.

“What do you make of this drawing?” Faebian enquires once again.

“The circle could represent a pill but I have a feeling it’s more the shape of Unit D from above.” The older man comments with some wisdom in his voice.

“What do you make of the font saying ‘Rx’ then?” The younger man asks with some anxiety in his speech.

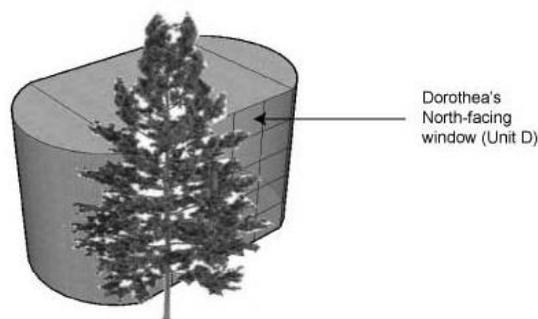
“You said her name was ‘Dorothea’ and so does the quick passage above. I think that isn’t quite an ‘R’ but is in fact a ‘D’ for ‘Dorothea’ with legs at the bottom making it look like the letter ‘R’ to illustrate her desire to flee.” The expert in mad archives states with genuine intellectual expertise.

“So she sent me this message worried about her life?” Faebian asks furtively.

The archivist suddenly pauses, removes his spectacles and says: “Be careful dear boy. This hospital has many secrets and ears are always about. Just the other day, I had to leave the staff canteen when a strange couple came to a dining table nearby to eavesdrop on what a friend of mine in Unit B and I were discussing related to hospital workplace policies.”

“I follow you. I guess I’m just feeling guilty that a friend needed help and I slept through the whole thing after my nightly meds kicked in.” Faebian replies slumping his shoulders with a sense of grief. He then gives his kind helper a hearty handshake before leaving the large room where much of the artifacts and records of the site of old were carefully stored in labelled boxed folders, organized carefully on their respective well-sorted shelves.

After leaving the ‘Admin-Annex’, Faebian rests his weary bones on a park bench facing Unit D. His eyes gravitate toward the window he suspects is Dorothea’s which faces the North some five floors up, and takes in the pill-shaped contours of the building that his archivist friend and confidant had stated was important in deciphering the emergency message. Faebian’s eyes glaze over feeling the numbness of the meds in his body and feels powerless thinking that Dorothea had been swallowed up by a giant pill of a hospital.



Unit D, 5th floor window, ladies’ side (South Border Regional Mental Health Centre)

(The End)