

The Pill

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

With my bags all packed and my bus trip ticket out of town already purchased electronically, I head into the bathroom of my frugal flat where a last jar of ‘correctives’ are resting by the sink. Feeling a sudden rush of anxiety from some of the painful memories about Catchment 4 and Dr. Pillpot, I grab the jar firmly, twist off the cap, and with slight hesitation watch the light beige capsules as they drop one by one into the toilet. After emptying the jar, with a small tear falling from my right eye, I flush the toilet and watch the swirling waters swallow up the last of the traceable chemical compounds that had kept me tethered to Catchment 4 when the Airborne Server was still active. Clutching the empty jar for a short instant, I slip it into my jacket pocket—keeping it as a memento of my former life—before grabbing my suitcase and heading out of the door.

Before heading to the eBus terminal via the electro-line, I head over to my friend Ken’s place to get some last minute instructions on how to find the Getz Ravine colony. Walking under the familiar rail bridge, I enter into the boundary of the Westdale neighbourhood and find my good buddy Ken’s rooming house. Ascending the two flights of steps with my luggage, I find Ken’s chestnut-coloured door and knock three times.

“Come in!” A gruff voice says from within the 3rd floor flat.

“Hi Ken! It’s Winston. You remember that I’m leaving town today, right?”

“Of course, Winston! Of course!” Ken replies motioning me to come inside with his long white and red visually impaired cane in his right hand.

“You remember that time we talked about going to Getz? I’m counting on you remembering how to get there... The bus ticket I got will take me as far as Vaughan Heights. Once I get off the bus, I’ll be lost without your special instructions.”

“Yeah, I can tell you how to get to Getzmana from Vaughan Heights. They’ll be some hiking and bush-whacking needed but that’s kind of the charm of that place. It really feels like you’re in the wilderness when you get close to the Split Rock entrance...”

“Great! Let me get out my phone to type up some notes. So you really visited the place way back in the day?”

“Yeah. I lived there for three months back in the late 2010s. Things have probably changed a lot since. You know they had strict rules over ‘correctives’ back then, don’t you?”

“I’ve heard of that from folks in Catchment 4. You do know that I’m planning to test out life off the grid with the server being down and all, right?”

“That’s a real game-changer! You’re one of the pioneers of the trade! This is the first time they’ll maybe make the exception and let you into Getz, buddy! Have you figured out the half-life of your ‘correctives’ yet?”

“I dumped them down the toilet just before I came here. I figure that with the server down, I’ve got about two weeks living large as a renegade. By that time, they’ll start to wonder why I’m not at my follow-up appointment. When they start to look into my whereabouts in Zone B5, I figure they won’t have the server operational yet to track down my exact chemical coordinates. By then the ‘correctives’ should be flushed out of my system anyways.”

“Good plan! I’ve got faith Winston! I’ve got faith. Here’s how to get there...”

After typing a few notes on the trek from the Vaughan Heights terminus to Split Rock encampment, I give my friend Winston a long hug and head out of his abode. After going down the same flights of stairs, I head back into the streets of _____ and walk over to the closest Electro-line station located three minutes northeast from the squalor of the same old rusty rail bridge. Noticing that a train heading in the direction of the bus terminal is entering the station, I quickly run up the escalators and board one of the cars with my heavy suitcase as the chime sounds three times to signal the doors closing. Feeling slightly out of breath, I sit down and watch my chemical zone drift by as the Electro-line train heads off toward the eBus Terminal.

After about twenty five minutes on the Electro-Line, an electronic voice resounds through the speakers in my car:

“The next station is Broderick... This is a terminal station... Connections to eBuses are available on the main level...”

As the elevated rail cars empty, I reach into my small shoulder bag for my eBus ticket and head down an escalator toward the bus terminal. As I approach the platform for the bus to Vaughan Heights, I notice a pair of ‘regulators’ in their characteristic charcoal uniforms stationed by an electric ticket kiosk. Hoping that I won’t be stopped and interrogated, I quickly take my eBus ticket out of the bag again and wave it in the air at the pair of men, to show them that I’m pressed for time trying to get to my bus connection. One of the ‘regulators’, equipped with a ‘correctives’ testing probe attached to his service belt quickly nods at me and shifts his gaze toward another commuter in the opposite direction, allowing me to access the terminal and my bus route out of town.

“Now boarding for Vaughan Heights! Have your paper or eTickets ready!” A bus operator hollers from about twenty feet away on the south platform.

After having my ticket scanned and my suitcase checked in the cargo compartment below, I board the double-decker bus and settle into my window seat. Soon the bus driver blasts the horn twice as the bus departs Broderick Bus Terminal. Looking out of my window toward the city skyline and downtown core, my eyelids grow heavy and I fall asleep as the bus speeds off toward its destination. After about two

hours of uninterrupted slumber, I suddenly drift back into a more alert state, awakened by the sound of the operator's voice as he shouts through his PA system: "Vaughan Heights! Please remember to collect your luggage as you leave the bus!"

After finding my grey suitcase on the bus platform, I exit the terminus and head to the nearby nature trail leading to Trench Megacity's central ravine that my blind friend Ken had known about prior to losing his sight a decade or so ago. Noticing a wooden sign with an arrow pointing in the direction of the 'Bay Forge', I check the notes on my phone again and head into the thick shrubbery on my trek northward. After about a forty-five minute hike along the riverbed, passing the notorious Skeltopp Penitentiary and the exit into the posh residential neighbourhood of Bay Forge, I keep a mental note of something Ken had stressed to me about veering due east upon seeing a slender tributary running downstream toward the same creek bed and central River. Keenly focusing on the watershed, I suddenly spot the changing course of the waterway and catch the creek forking near a stand of young Paper Birch trees. Heading uphill into what Ken had described as a 'damp mountain bike trail', I follow the paths forged by riders and look for the 'twin boulders' of Split Rock. After more of a climb, I spot the large gap between the boulders Ken had told me about, but look around failing to see the thriving and vibrant encampment community I had also heard about from the tales of other community allies. Stepping over the stream and into the Split Rock clearing, I am hit with a sudden wave of desolation, noting the tattered remains of the encampment that the legendary Jimbo Hailfeather and his wife Belinda Crow used to lead as elected chiefs. Instead of a myriad of coloured tents arranged in circular fashion around a large central fire pit like Ken had reminisced about, lay some scraps of old fabric from a tarp, a few torn tents, piles of plastic rubbish and the charred structural remains of an old teepee. As I sadly peered around the grounds of the old outcast collective, I notice some movement by a stand of large Spruce trees directly to my right. Peering downward at the base of the evergreen trees, a latch made of joined birch logs pops open and a man's face peers up at me.

"Greetings stranger! What brings you to Getz today?" The voice says almost appearing to talk from a hidden mouth at the base of the stand of trees.

"Is this the way to Getz? I'm looking for Jimbo of Split Rock, any chance you know him?" I ask politely.

"Jimbo was killed in the big raid last fall. His wife Belinda was taken away with the others when they razed Split Rock to the ground..."

"Were they able to locate Getz? I'm looking for the place right now... I didn't realize this had happened to Split Rock..."

"Jimbo got word of the raid early and we were able to cover up the latch here where my head is... This opening leads to the old Fort Getzmana..."

"I'm Winston by the way... I don't suppose you know Ken do you?"

“Nice to meet you Winston! I can tell you’re an ally already... I’m Darryl by the way... Ken I’ve heard of through someone else. I’ve been here about fifteen years to this day...”

“Nice to meet you Darryl! I hear there’s some sort of blood reagent test for people new to the colony... I have quite the story to tell you about being on ‘correctives’...”

“Are you on the traceable kind?”

“I am... But hear me out... You might be able to make an exception when you hear my story...”

“Sure thing... Follow me Winston... The reagent testing area is now underground...”

Following Darryl, I lower myself down into the small opening and close the latch over top of me.

“Don’t mind the Little Browns, they’re just about to begin their hibernation cycle... You’ll grow accustomed to them being around, I assure you!” Darryl says to me.

“It’s dark down here! I sure hope I pass the screening...” I say to Darryl slightly worried.

After following my new acquaintance’s lead, I arrive at a small booth lit up by a torch mounted on the cave’s wall. Inside the booth is a woman wearing a medic’s gown who quickly greets me with her waving hand.

“New to Getz? Welcome, I’m Patty! I’m here to check your blood for ‘correctives’. We need to make sure you’re safe for us along with being nice which you appear to be...”

“Hi Patty... I’m Winston. I need to explain something to you before you test my blood... I came from Catchment 4 but there’s a bit of a twist here in the story I’m going to tell you...”

“Sure thing... What’s your story, Winston? I’m listening.”

“I recently dumped my ‘correctives’ and fled town. You see, I still have ‘correctives’ in my system but the Airborne Server is down. Lots of folks from Catchment 3 and 4 are off the grid and on the run right now because their chemical GPS signal is off-line...”

“I heard something about the outage... How long do you figure it will take to restore their chemical tracking capabilities?” Darryl jumps in to ask.

“Could be two to three weeks I suppose. Plus I’m now out of my chemical zone in downtown _____, some two hours away from Trench City...”

“I’ll tell you what Winston... We’ll check the half-life of your ‘correctives’ and see if this is safe enough for us... With the Airborne Server being down, we may make an exception here...”

“Thanks Patty! Should I roll up my sleeve?”

“Yes! I’m just going to take a small sample from your right arm to test the half-life of the ‘correctives’ to figure out how many more days of traceability we have to work with here...”

After drawing a small lavender vial of blood, Patty takes a pipette and puts a drop or two of blood in a small chamber attached to a small square machine-box. After activating the machine, an orange light flashes and gives flashes the number 170.”

“You’re traceable for about approximately one week or 170 hours. I think we can make an exception here in your case. Your story about escaping while the Airborne Server is still down really does inspire us, Winston. Welcome to Fort Getzmana!”

“Thank you so much Patty! Ken was right about you guys! This place feels like home already!”

“I’ve got to get back to doing panel duty. It was nice to meet you Winston!” Darryl says before heading back to the Split Rock entrance.

“You’ve got solar panels? That’s awesome!” I shout back to Darryl as his short and stocky profile drifts away in the same darkened tunnel.

“We’re lucky that Belinda hid them before the raid. For a while there it was quite tough for us without any power and electrical connection to the outside world. When it got to mid-winter and the snows finally came, the sentries left Split Rock and we were able to restore power with our tech guy...” Patty says to me with Darryl now completely out of sight further down toward the cave’s entrance.

“Come along Winston! I can leave my booth here and show you around... Welcome again! You said you’re a friend of Ken’s?”

“Yes, I am Patty. Ken told me how to find my way here all the way from Vaughan Heights as a matter of fact.”

“Our colony members really do want to hear your stories about Catchment 4. This is the first time in a while we’ve screened with the half-life test to let someone in to our underground colony... How does it feel to be off the pill and out of the chemical grid?”

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