The Cure

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The Meat Eaters

He wrote a story about their darkest time, brother and sister in Chicago, broke, he living at the Y, she at the Girls' Club. Their father had sent him to save her, take her home, back down South, but she couldn't go, she told him, she had to be here with her psychiatrist, only he could save her. So the brother stayed on a while and looked for work; they both looked for work and in the evenings met in cheap diners to eat.

One night her meat was bad, the greenish color of spilled oil, but she didn't notice until halfway through. She began to cry, she couldn't help herself, it wasn't just the meat but that everything had come to this, the two of them in a lousy diner in Chicago, so unhappy, desperate. She continued to cry as they went outside and walked leaning against the wind; why was she here - pausing at the bridge of the Chicago River - why was she anywhere?

In his story she jumped, quite suddenly; he could not save her, his beautiful, brilliant, delicate sister.

When the story was published, she accused him of feeding on her, her life. It's my life too, he said, and besides that was fiction. You didn't kill yourself, he pointed out.

She invited him to go home, and he went.

Lying in bed she imagined writing her own story. It would include his story and his defense of it, and she'd put down how he read her diary when she was thirteen. Also, the lie he'd told that slinky girl next door; My sister lets her boyfriend go all the way. She began to guess from the silences when she walked past tables in the cafeteria, and once, a hissed word: "Slut." Finally her best friend explained.

She remembered telling, one night at dinner, and their father saying, "This is coming out of your hide, son." It comes back to her, that moment, as her father and brother rise from the table, her father touching his belt. She is staring down at her plate, at the roast beef, the red juice, gorged with excitement and fear.

The Word Hospital

She worked at a university advertised on matchbook covers, a correspondence school in Chicago. "Learn to be a Writer! Fun, Fame, Profit! Just 12 Easy Lessons." By day she read the stories written by housewives in Syracuse, Missoula, Orlando. Each night she went to singles bars.

At Christmas her father had sent a complete set of the Oxford English Dictionary, all thirteen volumes, full-sized; they lay beneath her bed, pulling her down. Each one weighed more than the stone in Virginia Woolf's pocket, when she walked into the River Ouse.

Her father wrote often. "How are you? Are you writing?" Writing was the theme of his correspondence.

She did not write letters, poems, stories, novels, plays, essays, or reviews; she was a not-writer, an unwriter.

There were so many tired words, discouraged, flayed words. They were thick in the air around her, in Marshall Field's, at the correspondence school editorial meetings, at the Leonora Girls' Club where so many sad women lived. They were in the housewives' stories. In the margins of the stories she penciled in tiny letters, "very nice!" "lovely," "poignant," "made me want to puke," then erased all her words. The stories went back just as they had come. The correspondents began to complain. Eventually she would be fired.

But meanwhile she established a word hospital. Into it went words that needed to rest. Some went into intensive care. Fabulous. Raven-haired. Feline. Boobs. Passive Aggressive. The. If. Why. Fuck. Ciao. Love.

Crazy Jane

Trolling Michigan Avenue in her short short skirt she caught a man who thought her rather Appalachian. They went to his apartment in a glassy tower high above the lake. Hours passed. She was gorgeous, he told her, amazing; she could be a Playboy centerfold. But she'd better be going, his girlfriend was expected, an early flight from New York. He gave her money, a large sum - for a taxi, he said - which she spurned. Outside, it was not quite dawn. There were long shadows in the street. A man followed behind her, urgent footsteps. Then the beacon of a lighted cab. She ran, heart hammering, slammed and locked the door, sped away with her life. What would her father think?

A few days later, in Lincoln Park, she approached a man leaning against a tree. She recognized something familiar in his dull eyes: Death, the lover she deserved. She let him feel her up, then followed him to his room, a basement full of stains and smells, did everything he asked.

That night at the Leonora Girls' Club she read Yeats. Yeats had kept her alive in Chicago, the worn blue volume holding her afloat on nights like these. She read about Innisfree and Byzantium; she read, again and again, the Crazy Jane poems, Crazy Jane and the Bishop, Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman, Crazy Jane on the Mountain, but she was sinking. When at midnight the policeman found her shedding her clothes on a bridge above the river, she quoted Yeats for explanation: "There's more enterprise in walking naked."

Much later, after commitment and on a day pass, she met a man on Division Street. A photographer, he claimed, would she consider modeling? Inside the foyer of his building he saw the hospital band on her wrist and the book under her arm. They went for coffee instead. He liked Yeats, too, he told her; his countryman, a mad genius. Then he confided his own story, he a man in high position who lured women to undress, then jerked off before them. She was moved; it was a sad sad tale. He began visiting her at the hospital, the two of them seated in wingback chairs in the parlor. He had a droll Irish wit; he could make her laugh, at his expense, or hers.

Cure #1

Her psychiatrist pulled up a chair beside the bed and grinning, inquired about sex. Freud, and all that.

Rorschach, blood work, EEG. Motley colored pills in paper cups.

Her father came to visit, bought her a new dress, drove her to the Mississippi River and back in a rented convertible. They did not speak of the hospital, or of the event just before. The pain in his face made her want to weep.

Her mother flew up later. “What’s the matter with you,” she demanded, “your father is sick with worry. He wants to know why you wouldn’t want to live,” she said - there was acid in her voice – “a beautiful young woman like you.”

Months of day room, ping-pong, therapies of all kinds. Medicines assayed, abandoned. A stubborn case. If he didn’t care so much, the doctor said, he’d try electroshock. All the old ladies had electroshock.

One day - her insurance was running out - he confessed that he thought of her constantly, shaving, driving in from Glencoe, picking out camping gear at Abercrombie’s, putting his children to bed, lying beside his wife. She was - he let his eyes roam slowly over her, inch by inch - maddeningly seductive.

This approach was efficacious; she was elated, vivacious, even well groomed, dressing up for him. She was cured.

Cure #2

She rode the elevator up to his darkened suite. As his outpatient, she had the last appointment of the day. The secretaries were gone by then, but just to be safe he pushed the couch up against his office door.

One night, sick with flu, she called and begged him to come to her apartment. There was a meeting, he said; besides, he might be seen. She pleaded, said she was frightened, afraid she was going to die. Finally he came, put-upon and empty-handed; no flowers, as she’d imagined. He took off his clothes, pulled back the covers. She didn’t want that, she tried to tell him. Oh come on, it would do her good. Her body was slick with sweat. He slid back and forth across her.

The phone rang. It was her mother. She talked in a normal voice to her mother while he continued to move above her, his face turned to the side.

The next day she packed her things and went home, back to her parents' house in Virginia. She got into bed in her old room. Her childhood things were still there, the books alphabetized with white letters she'd penned on their spines; the skirted dressing table with an oval mirror where her face had astonished her, going pretty; on top of the bureau in a glass case the miniature doll in dirndl and white cap her father brought her from Holland, the year she turned sixteen. Holland was the setting, her mother had confided soon after, of his first affair.

After the fever was gone and the cough, she remained in bed, listening to the sounds of the house - her father's typewriter, the doorbell, her mother's tennis shoes complaining against the floor of the hall as she went by: busy, busy.

Weeks passed. Her father brought books to her from the library. She came out of her room only to eat. There was a letter from her brother: "What's going on? They're afraid you'll try something again." Her mother arranged a visit to the family doctor; a checkup, she said.

The doctor was white-haired, grandfatherly. He went over her carefully, tapping, listening, his hands on her body laid out on the table. Tears began to leak from her eyes. He chose not to notice.

On the way home, she told her mother about the doctor in Chicago. It was raining hard. The windshield wipers squeaked furiously back and forth. Her mother glanced at her briefly, said, "A married man?" then turned back to the road, her lips in a tight line that was almost a smile.

That night she lay on her bed and stared at the doll, the blonde ringlets, the puckered lips. "I'm too old for dolls," she had blurted out when she opened the package all those years ago. Her father shrugged, and looked away. "I love it, though. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." "I know, sugar," he'd said, "you'd never hurt anyone's feelings."

She jerked up from the bed, grabbed the lamp, and threw it across the room. The case exploded with an electrifying crash. The doll toppled to the floor.

The house was quiet, her mother and father asleep in their separate rooms. She picked up the doll by one foot, shook off the glass, and carried it outdoors. With her father's shovel she dug a shallow hole in the back yard near the rhododendrons. She dropped the doll inside and covered it with dirt, then a thick blanket of leaves.

The rain had stopped. She listened to the silken movement of wet leaves and inhaled the thrilling odor of loam, letting it rise up through her. She was going to live. The next day she would pack her things, take a train further South, and find herself a job.

Cure #3

This was years later. She was married, more or less happily, though she had vague fears, and many nights could not sleep. She and her husband lived in a farmhouse surrounded by woods.

In the early mornings she walked in the woods with a foxlike dog, a stray she'd found injured in a ditch. Dilsey, she'd named her, for Faulkner's character: "Dilsey, she endured."

It was one of those mornings. She put on a heavy jacket and followed Dilsey down the hill to the small winding creek.

Winter was just ending. The trees and woods floor were shades of brown and umber; the sky was white as parchment. Last year's leaves still clung to the beeches; curled and dry, they rattled like papers in the slight wind. The tips of other trees were swollen with buds; tiny oak leaves had already broken through, embryos unfurling.

She watched Dilsey race up and down the creek, snapping joyfully at the water, then bent to look at lichen on a log: tiny scarlet cups, an exhilaration of detail. There were bracket fungi on an oak tree; she broke one off, breathed in the dark rich odor. Lying down on the leaves, she closed her eyes. The sun was mild on her face; she could almost smell jonquils in the airs. All around her the trees made quiet noises, but beneath their sound was a silence she could float upon, as on the surface of a deep, still pond.

That afternoon in town she bought a black and white speckled notebook - the kind she'd used in fourth grade, before anything went wrong - and it was then that she began to write things down.