

Diagnosis

‘What’s he got this time?’

The note of disgust in the girl’s voice turns my head. She’s staring over my shoulder at the prescription labels I’m affixing to boxes of Acyclovir.

Everyone with a repeat prescription has their own roll of stickers printed with their name and address. My new boss, Max instructed me to check the spreadsheet of repeat customers before printing new labels. Stephen Baxter, whose prescription I’m currently preparing, is a repeat customer.

‘Herpes? Ugh, what a whore.’

The girl’s name tag reads ‘Tara’ followed by two Xs. She tears a bite out of a Double Decker, flicking flakes of chocolate onto the shoulder of my new uniform.

‘You know this guy?’

‘I know he’s a man-whore who still hasn’t learned how to use protection,’ she scoffs, shooting a cursory glance over her shoulder. ‘Been a regular since I joined last year. Had treatment for at least three STDs since.’

‘Maybe I should throw a couple of condoms in,’ I say, looking around to see if we’re still alone.

She laughs: a nasal inhalation bordering on a snort. ‘Don’t worry about Max. He’ll be in the office, beating off to the prostate cancer posters.’

‘He’s gay?’ I ask.

‘As a rainbow unicorn sitting on a butt plug. But you didn’t hear it from me - he hasn’t come out yet,’ she adds in a whisper.

‘I see.’

‘I’m Tara by the way,’ she says, pointing to her nametag.

‘Hannah,’ I say.

I’d shake her hand, but she’s already reaching under the desk to stash the last of her Double Decker in her black Michael Kors bag.

‘Don’t judge,’ she says, wiping her mouth. ‘I’m supposed to be on a diet, but I missed breakfast and I don’t get off until three.’

‘It’s cool,’ I laugh, putting the mint green boxes of Acyclovir into a white paper bag, and sealing it with a sticker. ‘I know the feeling.’

She looks me up and down, her top lip curling in scorn.

‘Ugh, you have like the perfect body. What are you an eight? Ten?’

I decide against telling her that I’d rather have a little extra fat on my hips than the numerous medical problems my figure cost me.

‘I actually put on a couple of pounds over Christmas,’ I say.

‘Only a couple? Jesus, I need to pocket some lithium or something,’ Tara says. ‘Calm my appetite down.’

‘It’ll calm a lot of things down.’

I turn away to deposit Stephen Baxter’s prescription in the drawer marked A-E, although someone’s crossed the dash with red pen so it looks more like A+E.

I completely forget about Tara’s comments until a man who looks like a hipster English teacher in his brown leather jacket and rimless glasses announces himself to be Stephen Baxter.

This morning’s smoothie coagulates in the pit of my stomach at thoughts of his rampant promiscuity and various STDs. He’s well groomed but I wonder if his whole body is so clean.

I turn away to locate his prescription in the drawers and take a deep breath.

When I turn back, I smile my best customer service smile. ‘Do you pay for your prescriptions?’ I ask.

‘I do,’ he says, reflecting my smile. His teeth are so white they almost shine like in a cartoon. ‘Do you take contactless?’

‘Yeah,’ I say, sliding the card machine towards him.

He rolls up his sleeve to reveal a smart watch and lowers his wrist to the machine. Intermittent cuts disappear under his sleeve, some faded scars, others shining pink.

I look up, and he meets my eye. He knows I saw them.

He rolls his sleeve down and snatches his bag from the counter.

‘Have a nice day,’ he says, and makes for the door.

Nausea swims like a goldfish circling my gut before an elderly woman steps forward.

‘Hello, love. I’ve got a repeat to pick up. The name’s Margery Taylor. And I’ve got this new one, too.’ She hands me a green prescription slip for Amisulpride, an antipsychotic commonly used to treat schizophrenia. As I locate her repeat prescription, I remember what’s inside. Max demonstrated how to label and organise prescriptions with hers, which comprised two chemotherapy drugs and an SSRI. And now Margery has an antipsychotic to add to her pharmaceutical cocktail.

If you ask me, she isn’t taking dying too well.

Tara leaves at 3, and I kill the last hour of my shift stocking shelves. Max lets me go five minutes early as the next shift workers arrive.

‘Good job today,’ Max says as I’m pulling on my parka. ‘You catch on fast. I’m happy to have you on the team.’

‘Thanks,’ I say. ‘Happy to be part of it.’

‘You’re in tomorrow afternoon, right?’

‘Yeah. Two o’clock.’

‘Great. I’ll see you then.’

‘See you.’

It’s getting dark already, but I exhale with relief as I head for the bus stop. My first day is over. I think I’ll order a pizza when I get in, then climb into bed and watch Netflix all evening.

I dig inside my pocket for my cigarettes and pop one between my lips. I pause to light it, shielding the wind with one hand, over which I see a group of teens in tracksuits staring at me. The stench of cannabis smoke assaults my sinuses. I walk on, and the only girl of the group mutters something as I pass. All the boys laugh. I’ve been the butt of enough playground ridicule to know they’re laughing at me.

I take a deep drag on my cigarette as I walk on.

I shouldn’t care what some benefit scroungers think; I just wish I knew what they were laughing at.

Outside the Tesco, a homeless man sits in a faded blue sleeping bag. I dig out my phone and scroll through my Facebook feed as I pass.

‘Spare any change, love?’

‘Sorry, no,’ I say with barely a glance.

A mother pushing a pram emerges from the Tesco, and I’m stopped in my tracks for a moment.

‘Or could you spare a tab?’ he ventures. I turn back and meet his eye. I’ll feel like a bitch if I deny him now.

His hair is greasy and matted, his skin grey as smoke, but beneath his faded façade, his eyes glow like a cat’s.

I force a smile. ‘Alright.’ I step back from the path and produce a cigarette.

‘You got a light?’

‘Yeah.’ I light his cigarette for him.

‘Thanks.’

‘It’s fine,’ I say. ‘I just started a pack anyway.’ I’m about to start walking on when he replies.

‘Not just for the tab. For acknowledging me, I guess. Most people don’t even look at me.’

I only stare back for a second, contemplating my possible responses.

‘That’s rough,’ I say. ‘If it’s any consolation, I think most people do care. I guess we just don’t like to be reminded how close we are to the edge ourselves.’

‘I’d never thought about it that way.’ He stares pensively across the road as the cars speed by.

‘I don’t have any cash on me, but I could get you something to eat if you’re hungry,’ I say.

‘That’s alright. They let me help myself to whatever they throw in the bins.’ He nods to the Tesco. ‘I just need seven quid for the hostel down the road. I’m trying to get to a better place. I just need a hand, you know?’

‘Yeah. Well, I work on this street now, so I’ll drop you a few quid when I have change.’

‘Thanks, love. Have a good night.’

‘You too,’ I say, wondering how good his night can possibly be, sleeping rough in the cold.

As I reach the crowd waiting for the rush hour bus, the sun drifts behind a grey cloud. Music spills from the earphones of a woman in her early thirties: probably an office secretary, judging by her heels, pinstripe blouse, and high bun. A couple of men in suits are visibly annoyed by the woman. One stares at the traffic as though only refraining from throwing himself in front of the cars by sedately counting them, and the other glances around to see if anyone else has noticed her noise. Just when I think he’s about to say something, the bus comes into view and the crowd arranges itself into a line.

We file on, flashing our passes or handing over change for tickets. I sit at the back and observe the others getting on.

I wonder what’s wrong with each of them. How they’re treating themselves. What weighs on their minds behind the endless static.

What’s wrong with me? What do other people think of me?

The doors hiss shut and the bus rolls on.