

LARA S. WILLIAMS

*Caring*

I'd usually only take one or two pills at a time, never enough for anyone to notice. Marie would be in bed howling at me or in the shower shaking and twitching and I'd slip a couple into my shirt pocket with my notebook and golf pencils. There were so many tablets and capsules in her file that I sometimes grabbed the wrong one—a little bigger, a bit darker, different letters. I had to put them back. The bosses would know if she didn't have all her MS meds at the end of the month.

Marie was the easiest. All she did was moan about living out of Sydney. I told her all she used to do there was whore and shoot up and she'd get all glazed over like she really did miss it. She was in full swing today.

"You won't even let me get on the train," she screeched at me from the other side of the kitchen. I was scraping congealed oil out of her sink. No matter how many times I told her not to, she always chucked deep fryer oil right down the drain and left it sitting there. She wasn't even supposed to deep fry oil. One slip of her already slippery hands and it'd be the ER.

"What would you do there anyway?" I asked her again.

"Go see my friends." She badly slurred most of her words and it was only after three years of being her carer that I could understand her at all.

"You haven't got any friends there, you've got a pimp who probably got himself stabbed years ago."

"I just want to get on the train."

"How're you gonna do that then? You can hardly walk to the bathroom."

She pin-balled from cabinet to cabinet until she was clutching my upper arm. "I could get down

the station, get on a train, I've got people."

"So go then. No one will come looking for you."

She barrelled past me into the lounge room, hissing like a tin kettle. I left the sink still streaked with oil and opened her medicine safe. Her pills rattled in their sheaths, the days printed in bold letters down the side. I popped four into my palm and brought them to her.

"Do you want some water?"

"No." She slapped them into her crooked mouth and her neck stretched like a pecking chicken.

"Do you want to go to the library? Get some more true crime books?"

She snarled at me, one eye half closed. "I want to get on the train!"

I left her in the lounge and went to collect her washing. Her bedroom had a mealy funk about it. There were ice cream wrappers under the bed and a pair of underwear, blood-soiled, was tangled up in a pair of jeans. We were supposed to use gloves when there were bodily fluids. I picked them up with the very tips of my nails and slung them into the basket by the door. It was nearly full. I couldn't be bothered washing it all last time.

The bathroom was still steamed up from her shower. Wet towels covered the floor and a streak of black mildew ran from the corner of the ceiling into the extractor fan in the centre. I'd called the council a dozen times about coming and sorting it. I shook the box of washing powder next to the machine. Just enough so long as I used stain remover.

"We've gotta go to Coles for detergent anyway," I shouted down the hallway, "So we'll stop and get more books."

I heard her mutter something in reply. My nose itched in the wet heat of the room. I brushed against the cabinet and my leg came away stained. I put my hand to my shirt pocket and tapped it.

Marie didn't want breakfast so I put a blow dryer to her hair and made her put on a coat. The path outside her flat was thickly iced over. I held her elbow as she juddered down to the car. Our breath cottoned in the cold and my left ear ached.

"Your arthritis bad in this weather?" I asked her when we were both inside the car. It took three turns to get it going.

"I don't have arthritis."

"Okay."

The wipers screeched against the frost still slicked on the glass from my drive over.

Marie coughed into her hands and rubbed them on her jeans before speaking. “When can I get my cigarettes?”

“Friday.”

“I’m already out.”

“I told you to keep a couple spare. You get a new pack every Friday.”

“Can’t you give me one of yours?”

I laughed. “I don’t smoke, Marie. I told you.”

She pulled an almost completely flat pack from her coat pocket and tore it in half. A pinch of loose tobacco fell into her lap and she brushed it onto the floor where it disappeared amongst the receipts, food wrappers and slicks of cold mud. I could smell Marie’s hair, still wet from the shower and stinking of dog.

There were times when I left her in the car while I did her shopping but the bosses were coming down on all of us. We were supposed to include the clients in lifestyle choices. Teach them how to manage money. When to wash their towels. Why they needed to eat vegetables once a day. Stop them buying heroin and rubbing it into open wounds from lack of a needle.

I parked close to the front doors and waited for Marie to lever herself noisily onto her feet. Once we were inside I gave her five bucks and told her to buy whatever chocolate she wanted for the week. She usually bought two massive bars that she’d eat in one sitting, then swear at me for not getting her more. I watched her hobble down the nearest aisle. Her toes turned inward like they were trying to confer secrets.

I collected Home Brand detergent, bread, bacon, oven chips, cheese and chocolate biscuits. I stopped at the apple display and took one from the top. It sparked under the lights as though someone had polished every inch. The last time I’d tried to buy Marie apples she’d thrown the bag out of the car window and screamed for extra cigarettes until I gave in and bought them. The bosses said I shouldn’t have. Every time someone went round for the next week they were treated to her screaming until she figured the same trick wouldn’t work twice.

I found her at the end counter looking through Vodafone sim cards. She held one up at me.

“I need one of these.”

“You already have a phone.”

“It’s lost.”

“Since when?”

She shrugged, or twitched, it was hard to tell which.

“You’re not getting another one.” I knew she’d sold it. What for, I could guess. I pointed at the chocolate bars in her hand. “Is that all of them?”

“I want marshmallows.”

“All right.” I put the basket on the conveyor belt. “Unpack this and I’ll go get some.”

I knew she wouldn’t unpack anything but the check out chicks knew us here and they usually helped. There was one whose mum had Alzheimer’s and whenever she spoke to Marie there was always a silky patience to her. Marie called them all whores as soon as we were outside.

I chose two bags of marshmallows, one for roasting and one for hot chocolate.

When we paid I always gave the money to Marie. She liked handing it over. That was the only time I got sad for her—something simple like a couple of folded tenners made her feel powerful.

“You got the shit ones,” she said when I put the marshmallows on the belt.

“Why didn’t you choose them then?”

She puffed out her lips and her eyes jerked up towards the ceiling. The woman behind us watched her suspiciously.

I packed the groceries into the boot and we drove around the corner to the library. It was in an old school house and giant, naked gums surrounded it like sentinels. When I went to turn off the car Marie smacked her fist against her door.

“I don’t want any books!”

“But you’ve finished the ones you have.”

“I just want my cigarettes.”

I closed my eyes. The car rocked as Marie continued to hit the door.

“All right.” I turned back onto the road, tyres skidding slightly on the ice. When we were back at her flat Marie launched herself out of the car and took off down the path. One shoulder was permanently higher than the other. I grabbed the bags and dumped them on her kitchen counter. The washing machine was still churning.

“Listen, I have to go to the office,” I said, putting away the food. “You have to put the clothes in the dryer when they finish washing. Understand?”

Marie lay back on the lounge, chocolate already unwrapped and half eaten.

“Understand, Marie? Clothes. Dryer.”

“Whatever.”

I’d be back in the evening. I could put them in then.

Tina was head boss. It was a bad day when she was in the office. I saw her through the slatted blinds as I parked the car and like a bear smelling meat she turned and looked right at me. She raised a finger and pointed from me to herself. I felt for the pills again.

“Did you write your daily report?” she asked before I was even fully in the door.

“Not yet.”

“Are you missing the point of ‘daily?’”

“I’m going back tonight.”

“How was she?”

“Same as ever.”

Tina was so skinny I could see the tendons in her neck and forearms bulge whenever she got angry. “I don’t want to tell you again how important it is that you write everything down. I don’t care if it’s the same thing day after day, we need a clear picture of her behaviour.”

“Okay. I’ll do it tonight.”

“Give me your mileage.” She held out a hand. Her cuticles were pushed so far back from her nails that the rims were red. I gave her the sheet I kept in my car for recording kilometres and she squinted at it. The amount was always the same.

“You’re due at Zack’s in ten minutes.”

“I know.”

She tossed me a plastic bag full of pill charts and bottles. I could recognise the one I wanted just from the sound they made inside the plastic.

“Make sure he takes the new ones. He was fitting over the weekend.”

“I can’t make him.”

“Listen.” Tina levelled a pen at me. “I’m the one who has to call his dad and get him to come all the way here when Zack refuses to take his meds. Don’t make me do that again.”

“I can take him to play pool.”

“Not if he hasn’t kept that flat clean. You have to stop treating him like a child. If he does his

chores, he can go out and play pool.”

She didn't seem to see the contradiction in this and I wasn't about to point it out.

“I'll make sure they're done.”

“Don't forget the meds!” She shouted the last word and I gave her a Nazi style salute when she looked back down at my mileage report. After a long pause she opened a metal tin on her desk and took out two twenties. Her fingers left grease marks on them.

“You're on the work drop-off tomorrow. All three of them need to be there by eight so don't be late. And get some breakfast into them. I'm sick of getting charged because they eat all the food in the bloody cafeteria before work even starts.”

“I'll do my best.”

She waved me out without another word. Before pulling away I saw her through the window again. Her fingers were to her mouth, teeth flashing as she chewed.

Zack was a complete bastard. He jerked off into his clothes and left them lying on the lounge. When we had women working for us he'd leer at them for hours while they bossed him into washing up his dishes. I found porn magazines under his bed that were almost transparent from use. He didn't like me but I was the only one bigger than him.

He answered the door in his boxers on the sixth ring. Cigarette already in hand he stepped aside and grunted.

“Well this is a shit tip,” I said.

“Was asleep,” he muttered.

“You're always asleep.” I opened the safe under his kitchen cabinet and put the new pill sleeve at the back. The small bottle I opened quietly. It was safe to take five from his stash. He never needed them and they were always thrown out at the end of each quarter without a count.

“Tina said I can take you to play pool if you clean up,” I told him.

Zack ashed onto the carpet and leant back against the lounge, scratching his naked stomach. There was the beginning of a pot belly hanging over his boxers. His toenails were filthy and hooked.

“She's a bitch. I'm not cleaning anything.”

“Fine.”

“Can we still go play pool?”

I looked hopelessly at the dishes on the coffee table. When I moved suddenly my pocket rattled. It made me breathe easier.

“Sure. Get dressed.”

We went to the RSL club on the other side of town. The tables were free and they served beer from 11. Zack bought a schooner and a bag of chips and I racked the balls.

“You’ve got work tomorrow,” I said as he chalked a cue.

“Yeah.”

“How’s that girl you’re seeing?”

“Not my girlfriend any more.” He held the cue out to me, a rare example of generosity. I took the shot and sank a big.

“Heard you had a fit on the weekend.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you forget your meds?”

“Yeah.”

I missed the next shot and Zack snorted.

“You’ve gotta take them today, all right. We can’t have your dad coming down again.”

“He didn’t come down.”

“No?”

Zack sank two smalls in a row and half downed his beer. “He was working.”

“Right.”

“He’s coming next weekend for karaoke.”

I tried not to groan. I hated karaoke. Zack’s dad always sang Sinatra. He wasn’t bad but that somehow made the whole thing worse.

We played in silence for ten minutes. Zack pulled ahead by one and bought another beer.

“You remember what we were talking about a couple of weeks ago? About TAFE?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you looked at the booklets?” I’d gotten used to asking stupid questions.

“You can study gardening,” he said.

I putted another big and looked up at him. "Gardening?"

"I don't know the proper word."

"Horticulture?"

"Yeah." He finished his second beer and looked over at the bar.

"No more."

He scowled. "It's my money."

"And I'm in charge. Tell me about the gardening."

"You learn how to plant stuff."

"So it's a course?"

He sank another and moved on to the black. "Once a week or something."

"Do you want to do it?"

He shrugged and sank the black. When he looked at me he grinned and gave me the finger. I didn't try to stop him going to the bar. It was rare to get him in a good mood.

"Do you want to go over to the TAFE one day? You could talk to someone, get the registration forms."

"No point." He racked the balls again, this time taking first hit. It was a good break. It annoyed me how good he was.

"Why not?"

"Doesn't matter." He picked at his nose and inspected the findings.

"You might be able to get a better job if you did it."

He scowled and half downed the new beer. "I don't want one."

"What about extra money?"

"Dad gives me money."

"I reckon you'd like working outside."

"They won't let me out of the factory."

"Who won't?"

He raised his hand and swung it around his head. "Everyone. They don't like me."

I couldn't honestly disagree with him. "How do you know that?"



“My dad said so. They like us being somewhere else, doing the shit jobs, hiding away. I go to TAFE and ask to go to class, they’ll say there’s no room or I didn’t do good enough in school. It’s not my fault.”

“That’s such a load of crap.”

“Fuck you. I hate coming out with you. You think you’re better than Tina and those bitches but you’re worse. You try and be my friend but you just look stupid.”

I watched him for a moment as he sighted along the cue. If he wasn’t such a dickhead I’d have felt sorry for him, being given a dud brain. Instead I felt a cold trickle inside my chest. My eyes stung. I could do these same things for another three years, ten years, until the day they and I died and nothing would ever be any different. It was like washing a window in the rain.

Zack was looking now at a couple of women sitting at a nearby poker machine. They were in their forties, faces sanded down with smokes and sun. He edged closer to them while I stood staring unfocused at the table. I wanted to get out of the place. It stank of ancient beer moulded into the carpets. There was always someone playing Keno and they were always old and clutched their tickets like at any moment they expected to leap up screaming that they’d won a million. My throat constricted and I put the cue down on the table, disrupting the balls.

“We have to go.”

“We’re not done yet,” Zack said.

“I don’t care, I’m tired. And you have to clean the flat.”

“I’m not cleaning anything.”

“Fine,” I shouted. The women at the machine jumped and looked over. “Bloody stay here then. You can walk back.”

He didn’t follow me outside. He still had a few bucks for beer. Maybe one of the women would take pity on him.

I drove back to his flat and let myself in, leaving the door open behind me. I chucked his magazines into a bag and took everything out to the bin. I filled the sink with boiling water and wiped down every surface I could find with bleach. The carpets were beyond saving but I scraped the vacuum across them anyway. Tina would know I’d done it.

It took me two hours and Zack still hadn’t come back. I took out three pills and left them on the counter with a note telling him to take them. I wasn’t coming back again today. Part of me hoped he would refuse. Another part hoped he would never take any ever again and he’d live in a lock-down

with screamers. I took five more pills. I could feel them all now against my chest. I had enough. Eight months of collecting, I had to have enough.

I went past Marie's on the way out to the lookout. The clothes were still in the machine. She had eaten all the oven chips and there was new oil in the sink. I found her old SIM card stuffed behind a lounge cushion. She'd left the back door open. She'd probably gone down to the station to wait for the train. They didn't come after five so she'd be sitting there a long time. I should have gone to get her but the thought of her spitting in my ear about her friends and the city made it easy to leave again. I didn't put her pills out. I left a new pack of cigarettes on her bedside table. Eventually she'd smoke herself to a twitching pulverised death and the flat would be quiet. I could help with that.

I drove up to the lookout with the windows down. It was freezing. My nostrils burned. The baggie in my glove box was full now. I knew the right place to do it. The view looked out towards the bush, away from the town and the council flats.

The bag was cold in my hands. The pills were chalky and it took me two goes. When I first started collecting I thought something would happen. That I'd feel I was helping. That they'd know I cared. That wasn't what it was about. People can be bad and they can be sick and they can be both. After a while, you don't know the difference. That's when you had to stop.

First I relaxed. Then I got tired. Then I didn't care any more.