

“We have so many to choose from,” Dr. Okoye said. “Including some exciting new strains developed as of the past year. Designer, really exclusive. It all depends on the sort of effect you’re after. The more common ones, naturally, will be a little more affordable, and just as effective as the designer ones, if you’re worried about that—think along the lines of generic vs. brand-name medication—and we’ll run the aptitude tests to gauge your body’s likely reactions. There’s very little risk in the tests, mind you, I know you’d expressed some reservations about those—the process is much less invasive and the majority of the tests can be done in the app.”

Brynn drummed her fingernails on the table, lost in thought for a few seconds. She hadn’t quite adjusted to the sensation of these new, sharper, longer nails she’d allowed Elaine to coax her into getting. They were blood-red, garish and silly-looking under the fluorescent office lights, and she didn’t quite feel like they belonged to her yet. They sounded chitinous, vaguely insectile. She shuddered, immediately thinking of cockroaches. She folded her hands in her lap.

Dr. Okoye turned and pulled open a drawer, taking out a few sheets of paper. “No rush, of course. Feel free to take all the time you need to make a decision; I’ve got a few resources here for you to look over, plus the consent form and the agreements to sign just in case. I’ll let you know that I’m going to be on vacation starting next Thursday, so if you do decide to undergo this procedure after that I’ll be out of the country and it’ll be another one of the doctors here administering.”

“Tell me about designing my own?”

Dr. Okoye looked at her quizzically over the metal rims of his spectacles. “You want to design your own? It’s... well, it’s a very different process than this. You’d be better off picking one out of the brochure, honestly, I tell all my clients the same thing—viral is a hard game to break into. The odds are small, and it costs very much more than picking one and paying the license fees for the infections. So given your profile, and what you’ve selected, I’d suggest a bacterial infection, manifests in a week or two, and you can clear it whenever you’re done with it. If you’re after a viral one, you can go that route too, but bear in mind that for chronic infections, you’ll pay the licensing fee for every outbreak. So...”

Brynn wondered idly at what sort of murky financial incentives and kickbacks doctors could count on for steering people towards copywritten infections versus creating their own. She cast a glance over the brochures splayed out in front of her on the tabletop and accepted the sheets of paper the doctor offered her. Nothing caught her fancy quite yet in the pages of oozing

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sores and pustules. Page after page displayed inflamed welts, whiteish lumps, cauliflower-like protrusions sprouted from skin, each with an accompanying celebrity's name alongside, and prices underneath.

Evidently there was a special on a lesser Kardashian's herpes, down from \$16,000 to \$11,000, while Lindsay Lohan's latest strain of HPV developed in Greece was an extravagant \$56,000. The outbreak fee itself was a month's rent. Brynn had dreamed of getting Lohan's HPV because of its cachet but knew there was no way in hell she could afford it. Instead she flipped over to the non-designer diseases. The newer HIV viruses were trendy, but she worried they wouldn't be fashionable for too much longer, and they were just cost-prohibitive enough that she didn't want to take the plunge.

She left the doctor's office without having decided. The doctor had come highly recommended by her friend Elaine, who'd just gone in for her own designer disease, and who also now peevishly texted her that she was unable to be sat at their table until she arrived. Brynn patted herself on the back for properly gauging her time and arriving just late enough to inconvenience her. Elaine was a master at it, but Brynn was a fast learner. As they finally sat at their table, Elaine's testiness soon yielded to her curiosity as she pressed Brynn for the details on how the doctor's visit went.

Brynn's indecision irritated her, and she chided her friend for such a safe choice when Brynn told her she supposed she'd go for HIV-6.

Elaine rolled her eyes. "God, no one with HIV-6 has over a hundred thousand Instagram followers, what are you even talking about?"

Brynn liked HIV-6 because it seemed low-impact and affordable, and a lot of her favorite influencers were starting to get it.

"Brynnleigh Ashlynn Adams," Elaine admonished. Brynn hated her full name, and Elaine relished using it like a disapproving parent. "Poseurs get HIV-6. People who can't come up with their own brand get HIV-6, because they don't know what they actually want or who they are. It's literally the beige of viruses, really. You want something that'll pop, you need something on brand, and maybe something with a little edge. Plus, Kendall just released a line of lip lesions that everyone's imitating, and it's basically as easy to imitate that as it is HIV. So, like, don't go for that. Get something more unique."

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Elaine herself had been doing several treatments to get a rare strain of chlamydia to take root, one developed by an Olympic skater who'd now become a big gay icon. But some hidden fluke of her genetics made her unusually resistant to it. The tests hadn't anticipated it, which was a major annoyance, and she lamented throwing away so much money on these procedures when they didn't work.

"They say that it's some gene that only people from, like, my great-great-great grandparents' specific part of Norway have, it's like only the people in this one valley have this gene, and it makes them like ultra-resistant."

"I didn't know you're part Norwegian," Brynn said, taking a sip of her mimosa. The waiter had been gone for a while, and Elaine's drink was running low. She felt a dark glimmer of anxiety for him. Elaine was no picnic when she got bad service.

"Neither did I until this test," she said, brushing her blonde hair out of her eyes and draining her glass. "It's like, this hidden thing and it is literally the worst. Thanks, white privilege." She rolled her eyes. "And where the fuck is our garçon? I'm literally going to die of scurvy because of no vitamin D from the orange juice and then I'm going to die of withdrawal if I don't get another fucking mimosa."

C, Brynn thought. Vitamin C.

"But more important, did you come up with anyone who you're gunning for?" Elaine asked.

"I dunno, I don't want to do like a Kardashian or anything," Brynn said. Elaine nodded understandingly. She was going into consultant mode.

"Right. They're definitely not on brand for you," she said. She pressed her fingertips together. "I see you taking after an actor, like an actual actor, a good one. Benedict Cumberbatch? I dunno, I don't watch movies, but that seems kind of like it could be an interesting direction you could go."

Brynn didn't quite have a firm enough idea herself of whose disease she wanted to contract, as none of her idols were alive and she didn't take in a lot of Kardashian-type content.

"Oh, what about that comedian we saw last month?" she ejaculated. "She has the kind of vibe that I think you could pull off, and if you got her HPV that'd be so outside the box for you."

Brynn laughed but shook her head. "No, no, no," she begged off, "I've seen like, people in Walmart who have gone the comedian route. But I don't know, I don't want anyone's in

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particular, I have one that I want to do for myself. Like, I want to make my own, I don't know if I want to wear Lindsay Lohan's, you know?"

"Oh! What about Ivanka!" Elaine interjected. "She's got a new rhinovirus out, and her herpes is pretty chic, even if you can get it for Nordstrom prices."

Her phone vibrated on the table.

"Oh, wait—check it out. Frankie Grande just started a livestream of an apartment building fire. Look at those lesions! Oh my god he looks so good!"

They looked at Elaine's phone as she streamed the images in. It was New York, a large tenement engulfed in flames, great furious torrents of fire and smoke surged through the shattered windows. Frankie's voice was nearly drowned out by sirens.

"God, this is why I never come to New York anymore, the traffic is backed up like four blocks. I have to get THESE (he zoomed in on his own eyebrows) done so that I can make it to the gala, and then... This." He panned over the unfolding disaster, then put the camera back on himself. He laughed with his friends and primped for a few minutes, sending shout-outs to various followers who tuned in. Then, suddenly pensive, he mused if any of his followers lived there. *"It's pretty crazy to think that people live like that,"* he said. *"Like, so crammed in. This is like, a modern-day disaster. To all my followers living in there, if you're there, be careful... And..."*

He faltered for a second, clearly not sure of what he intended to say.

"Get home safe," he concluded. *"One love."*

One of his gays in the back seat chimed in, voice thick with derision: *"I mean, like, look that place. I would not be caught dead. I think it's pretty safe to say no one who lives there follows you."* Frankie laughed, then winced and touched one of the sores at the corner of his mouth.

Elaine muted the stream. "You know what the worst part is? Is that someone will actually literally be caught dead in there." She cackled and put her phone down.

Brynn rolled her eyes. "He looked so good," she said. "But anyway, seriously? A rhinovirus? Seriously? What do I look like to you, a librarian?"

Elaine put her hands up, a slight smile curling the corners of her lips. "Just a thought. I like the idea of you showing some edge with a sexually transmitted one, myself. It's the new direction you've been needing."

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The waiter returned. Elaine didn't look at him. Instead she just said, "Another mimosa, this one's *been* empty. Thanks." She took her phone out and started to text, not seeing that he had in hand another mimosa for her already.

She didn't say thank you when he set it down and cleared their plates away. She looked around the restaurant at the other tables, shaking her head. "It's not even that busy here, like, it's half empty, and he waits that long to come back and refill things?"

Brynn sighed and sipped her new mimosa. The waiter had not even left the table. Elaine loved to complain about getting bad service and swore up and down she tipped "minimum 25%. But like, for bad service? I will definitely go sub-fifteen. Because It's not that hard of a job to do. Am I right?"

Elaine had never waited tables before.

Brynn was certain the waiter heard. He looked back in discrete disgust at Elaine, and Brynn miserably made the motion for the check. He gave her a small smile, perfunctory but not disingenuous. Brynn had been nice to him.

"You ready, Brynnleigh?" Elaine asked, putting on a pair of enormous sunglasses.

"Don't call me that," Brynn said.

"Let's just get out of here, I'm sick of the mediocrity. Mimosa wasn't that good either. I just don't get it, it's like, everywhere I go, I get bad service."

Brynn resolved to tip double when Elaine commanded the check be split.

They parted ways soon after, Elaine complaining that she felt a little under the weather. "Not that kind of under the weather," she said ruefully. "It still doesn't burn when I pee. All I fucking want is for this fucking disease to kick in, and then I'm in, you know? But these perfect genes of mine are getting in my way." Brynn left Elaine on the street trying to summon an Uber, though drivers kept canceling on her because of her low rating.

Brynn made it home and leafed through the brochures Dr. Okoye had given her, wondering if open sores on her lips were in fact the brand she wanted. The brochure promised intimate and inimitable glamor, a chance to be like celebrities, and she felt more than a little ashamed at how badly she wanted to do this.

But what she really wanted was a personality disorder, something big and dramatic and splashy, but there wasn't a reliable way to transmit those, unlike Lohan's bespoke strain of HPV. Evidently it gave you warts in some as-yet-undisclosed design, but she'd read you'd know it

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when you saw it. Dr. Okoye had described it as a premium product, its exclusivity reflected in its every facet. *Unmistakable* was the word the brochure used to describe it.

Setting the pamphlet down, Brynn picked up her favorite book on mental illnesses and started reading about bipolar and borderline personality disorders, dissociative personalities, all the while wishing she had one of those grand Victorian-era hysterical disorders that lasted entire days, screaming fits and sensitivity to light, occasional swooning, and manic energy. Hysteria, however, was very un-PC, and the inherent misogyny of it would definitely get her cancelled quick.

Brynn wanted to develop her own disease, but it seemed prohibitively expensive and the required testing seemed exhausting enough on its own. It also needed more than a little luck to see daylight, because no one wanted to grant clinicals if it didn't have a following ready to absorb it, and Brynn had very little social media presence to speak of. But she wanted an artists' disease, a thinker's disease, maybe some writer's. She had scoured records looking to see if Anais Nin had ever had an STD, but she couldn't find out. Evidently one of Elaine's favorite vloggers had trademarked a new syphilis that went to stage three quicker than was ever thought possible, which was heavy on the mental symptoms and lighter on the discharge, which was clever, she thought. The infertility was worth the branding alone.

She got onto Instagram and started to browse around, keening with envy when she saw girls with constellations of angry red dots around the corners of their mouths, palms mottled and stippled with red. Someone had recently unveiled a new methicillin-resistant disease that was making the rounds in the gated communities of the world, and it was showing up in more and more fashion bloggers' and influencers' feeds, but she didn't know whose it was or where to get it. She saved a few photos of blistered skin to show to Dr. Okoye, but then thought better of it. If it occurred to her to take part in the trend, that usually meant the trend was already over. Elaine was the one to get out in front of it; Brynn always caught on too late.

She just wished she could catch a manic-depressive disorder for the excuse to get naked on a street corner, shouting conspiracy theories to generate some buzz. But you couldn't quite catch one like a cold, and the celebrities who did have mental disorders kept those close, it seemed, and were content to license only their biomes for the masses to adore and emulate. A mental illness was private, after all. In Brynn's wildest dreams she hoped to be a viral influencer

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and had no shortage of ideas for new ailments, but her measly 600 Instagram followers were not going to net her any deals yet.

That night she settled into her weekly ritual: she started a viral query email, this one to a bespoke clinic in Passaic, New Jersey, which specialized in branded viruses and diseases. She had been pitching ideas to different places, a few universities, some labs in DC, and the only place to bite was this urgent care/spa/barbecue restaurant located alongside an abandoned highway. They seemed shady, but they also promised that anyone infected with it had to pay licensing fees for it, which was huge. Not every place promised that. They asked her for more details, and in a poorly-formatted and misspelled email, asked her if she wouldn't mind filling out the application form they'd attached "so they could gage if she was the rite fit for them." The application had questions including:

1. Who do you want to have your disease/virus?
2. What does your disease/virus mean to you?
3. How will it be transmitted?
4. Who should/shouldn't be seen with your disease/virus?
5. How does this disease/virus fit into your broader brandscape?

Brynn cracked her knuckles and thought for a minute on what kind of illness she wanted. And then she began to type the answers, surprised at how good it felt to be creating something all her own.