

6 am

As she looked down at the soggy Lucky Charms in a cheap styrofoam bowl and plastic spoon, Luna still couldn't shake the feeling that this must all be some sort of nightmare. Surely this room with its flaking walls and caged windows was an elaborate dream.

One wall bore forced enthusiastic phrases: *you were given two hands so one could help; find strength within yourself*; and the worst of all: *the yellow brick road to recovery*. In reality, it just said *road to recovery* but it was on a yellow road, after all. Luna felt that these expressions were mocking her; they didn't motivate her even in the slightest, and certainly not when they were placed next to a wall of windows with metal grates.

The wall opposite displayed nothing at all but a very large clock. The wall itself was made of a noticeably dense concrete painted stark white; and for an inexplicable reason, this scared Luna more than the sarcastic slogans.

She took a bite of the Lucky Charms and with every squish, the walls seemed to close in further. She felt as soggy as the cereal which now resembled a bowl of bile.

Luna closed her eyes and wondered what she would be doing at that exact moment. Hopefully sleeping for a few more precious hours, eating breakfast with actual ceramic plates and metal utensils, going outside at will to walk her's and Ben's dog, Verbena...and Ben. Suddenly, Luna heard footsteps approaching and she clenched.

“Are you finished, sweetheart? You didn't eat a bite.” It was one of the surplus nurses. Luna frowned at the word sweetheart.

“I'm lactose intolerant.” Luna said, quietly. The nurse was standing far too close in Luna's opinion. She moved even closer as she opened up her clipboard, presumably to look at Luna's chart. *How did all of the staff in this hospital have clipboards handy?* The nurse clicked her tongue and Luna sunk her nails into her knee, attempting to steady herself.

“Well, it doesn't say that in your chart, honey. You have to eat something!” The nurse spoke slower and raised her voice as if trying to explain something very complex. Luna wanted to flip over the mush, but the nurse stood behind her, still with a plastered smile, still clicking her tongue. Luna painfully bit her lip, scooped up the pink pulp and smiled back at the nurse.

**10 am**

“Luna? Dr. Timore is ready to see you.” Luna shook herself awake at the voice of a surplus nurse that had checked her in, politely thanked her, and removed herself from her corner chair. Luna nervously walked to the Doctor's office wondering what tactic she should take. Should she appear chipper and happy and convey that this brief hold had already worked wonders on her emotional state? Should she act distraught and convey how much trauma she was experiencing and ask to be released? Maybe she could feign an illness so severe they would have to let her go home. Luna was surprised to see she was already facing a door reading: *Dr. Francis Timore* followed by a variety of different medical acronyms, not limited to *Phd* and *MD*. She knocked.

“Yes.” A voice spoke from within. Luna hesitated, it was neither an invitation to enter nor a question. Clutching the brass door handle, she entered. *Showtime*.

“Dr. Timore?” Luna asked brightly. No response. In fact, the doctor hadn't even looked up from his paperwork or registered her entrance. Luna tried again, still maintaining a polite smile and controlled level of enthusiasm.

“Hello, I'm Luna. I hope I pronounced your last name correctly.” Luna chuckled slightly but received no encouragement. She sat down in a cold leather chair, uncomfortable and unyielding.

“Why don't you tell me why you're here.” Dr. Timore continued scribbling away. Luna had never felt so ignored and scrutinized in her life. She wondered if this was some sort of test; perhaps he was trying to infuriate her, make her break down.

“Oh, well, I – uh, had a bad day. We all do, right?” Still, nothing from Dr. Timore. Luna could feel acid boiling in her stomach. She tried a different tactic.

“Working 40 hours a week, going to school at night, maintaining a household. I was just overwhelmed.” There seemed to be a buzzing in the room, a fly circled the overhead lamp, seeking warmth in the bitter office. The hum was punctuated only by the scratching of Dr. Timore's pen. *Keep it together, don't get distracted.* Luna clutched her knee, the pressure stabilizing her. This was hardly Luna's first examination. She had been to a number of psychiatrist, she knew how the game was played. She attacked from another angle.

“I admit I had too much on my plate. I overdid it, wanted to do everything myself. I should've asked for help sooner. I see now...there's nothing wrong with needing help. I've already learned so much about myself here.” The scratching of the pen, the fly ringing in her ear...*look at me!* Luna wanted to scream; but she didn't.

“I really feel like –” Luna was cut off by Dr. Timore's coarse voice.

“It says here you had a suicide attempt.” The patronizing contempt in his voice caused the acid to rise to Luna's throat.

“Well, just...just one time. It was a momentary lapse of judgment. I'm fine now.” Luna instantly wished she hadn't said it. She knew by his nodding what the verdict was. She threw her hail mary.

“It's finals right now, and there's no one to cover for me at work. I've worked so hard this year, I can't...I...the consequences of staying here will outweigh...” Luna trailed off, and said exactly what was on her mind.

“Please let me go home.” Dr. Timore finally looked up, the silence was stifling.

“No. I'll see you tomorrow.” The scribbling commenced, the buzzing increased, the acid burned.

“Thank you for speaking with me, Doctor.” She reached out slightly to shake his hand, but let it fall to her side and headed for the door.

2 pm

“Alright, who's up for some art?” said an enthusiastic voice from the common room door. A counselor entered with boxes of crayons and yet another simpering smile. Luna felt uncertain of whether to excitedly raise her hand, or to look as miserable as she felt. She had concluded that morning that there were only two options of how to escape: by being as cooperative as possible; or by demonstrating how upsetting and ineffective this experience was. While pondering her decision, Luna glanced casually about the room. There were more chairs pushed clumsily against the wall, and more inspirational posters. There were also a dozen stuffed animals.

*“You need to get rid of these damned stuffed animals. Now! Your room is a damn pigsty.” Dad said, kicking a lone giraffe across the room.*

*“Daddy stop! I'll put them away, I promise.” Luna said earnestly, gathering up the pile of animals closest to her.*

*“I said now!”, he yelled, “you're sixteen and acting like a child. Are you a whiny little baby?”*

*“No, I...they just mean something to me. They're...” Luna trailed off.*

*“Clean this crap up now or I'll burn every single one of them.” Dad walked out, slamming the door. Luna looked at the hundreds of stuffed animals around her. Alligators, bears, cats, dinosaurs...at least a dozen for every letter of the alphabet. She gathered them around her and curled up.*

“Luna?” A kind voice snapped Luna back into the barred room.

“Yes, ma'am.” Luna blinked furiously.

“Luna, would you like some drawing paper?” The nurse was cautiously watching her. Luna bit her lip; then smiled brightly.

“Yes, please. I would love some. Are there colored pencils?”

“No, sweetie. It's a safety hazard.”

“It's okay. I completely understand.” Luna sighed and took a crayon.

### **3 am**

The lights flickered ominously in the hallway as Luna, yet again, scoured each page of the *Patient's Rights Handbook*. She had always prided herself on her impressively thorough researching skills, and therefore was certain she would find a loophole somewhere; but there was none. Luna threw the handbook on the ground and buried her face in her hands. She could hear each door of the rooms creaking open one by one: hourly checks. *How many hours had it been? Dozens? Hundreds?* The door to her room opened quietly and a voice whispered, “Having trouble sleeping again?”. Luna shrugged and shook her head, not certain what that answer meant. The graveyard nurse said something about upping her medication, but Luna shook her head again, and rolled over away from the light of the hall. Before she turned, she saw the nurse writing in a chart, presumably Luna's. She closed her eyes and drifted off.

*“Do you guys want more wine, you can open another bottle in the kitchen.” Mom motioned with her left hand; her right was holding a topped off glass of red.*

*“Um, no that's okay, Mom. We have to get going in a bit.” Luna gave Ben a glance and he nodded fervently.*

*“Oh, right. I have – uh, a video call with a client in the morning. They're overseas so it's a – it's...time difference.” Ben chugged down the rest of his wine nervously, Luna patted him on the shoulder.*

*“Oh, go on, it's a weekend! Besides,” Mom took a large gulp of wine, nearly draining the glass, “What's the point of working remotely if you can't do it remotely hungover?”*

*Dad turned up the volume of yet another sports game he was both watching live and taping for*

*future viewings.*

*“Yeah, that doesn't really make sense. I think we're gonna go now.” Luna reached for her purse, “And it's Sunday night, by the way. That doesn't count as a weekend.”*

*“Good god, Luna, you're so negative,” Mom drained the rest of her glass and walked into the kitchen, “We packed you up some leftovers and we bought those cookies you like so much.” She handed Luna a box from the fridge.*

*“Mom...you didn't have to do that.” Luna took the box guiltily, “Thank you.” Mom was already opening another bottle of wine. Luna sighed and glanced at Ben, he shook his head perceptibly.*

*“I – we can stay for another glass. Right – babe?” Luna looked at Ben imploringly.*

*“Yeah...of course. I'll cut up some fruit.” Ben took the box of food from Luna, placed it back in the fridge and pulled out some peaches.*

*“Make sure you grab some napkins, Ben. Luna spills everything.” Daddy called from the living room, the ice cubes clinking in his glass.*

It's so cold, Luna thought. Ben must be hogging the blankets again. She was far too tired to play tug of war over their quilt, so she curled up, tucking her hands under her pillow. It was flat and scratchy. Did I switch with Ben again? She reached over the side of the bed to touch their dog, Verbena's head; but she wasn't there. Maybe she's using the bathroom...Luna paused in her thoughts a moment, suspicious.

A voice suddenly called through the hallways, jarring Luna back to consciousness, “Good morning everyone, 6 am, breakfast time!” The voice repeatedly shouted this as he walked down the narrow hallways of the hospital. Without sitting up, Luna watched the other patients drag like the undead down the hallway to the cafeteria.

**4 pm**

“Rec time!” yelled one of the surplus nurses. This particular man had told Luna his name at least twice, but she still had no recollection. Luna picked up her book and feigned intense concentration. She had no interest in shooting hoops or standing around awkwardly in the courtyard; both sounded unpleasant.

“Luna, will you be joining us for Rec time?” asked the nurse. Luna held up her book and the nurse nodded. As he walked away, Luna appreciated that the nurse didn't try and badger her to come outside; he was the first person so far that hadn't treated her like a child...or a time bomb.

The same Beatles album had been playing continuously over the last several hours. Whoever was choosing the music had an affinity for “Hey Jude” in particular. They played all 7 minutes of it four times in a row, perhaps thinking no one notice; Luna did.

*Ben's been waiting in the car all day to visit me at the three allotted visiting hours. I wish he didn't have to, I wish I hadn't put him through this...I wish...that I wasn't losing hope. Why am I the only one that hates this song? Everyone always talks about how powerful and emotional the song is; it's 7 minutes of runs and repetitive lines, honestly. I'm starving, I can't eat anything at this place. Mushy cereal this morning, mayo soaked wonder bread this afternoon, and rubbery pork chops for dinner. Maybe Ben will bring me food, they'll probably deem it a “safety hazard”. I'm starting think that just breathing is a “safety hazard”. This place is a hazard, I don't feel safe here. All the simpering smiles and faux-ally attitudes, it's making me crazy. Maybe I am, maybe I –no, keep your head. Tomorrow, I'll go home, tomorrow, I'll go, tomorrow...tomorrow – “Hey Jude” again, are you serious? Jude-y jude-y jude...stop! Stop it!*

Luna clenched her fists and pulled her sleeves further over her arms, all the way over her bandages and hands.

*5 pm*

“Butter-like spread.” Charlotte turned the tab of butter over in her hand. “We can't even have real butter.”

“We can't even have I-Can't-Believe-It's-Not-Butter” Luna opened her tab and spread it on her cold roll, “Not that I believed it was butter anyways.”

“How's the salad?” Charlotte asked, eyeing Luna's nearly untouched greens.

“Like grass. Limp and undressed. I feel like a cow.” Luna pushed her plate away and picked up her cold roll.

“Better to be a cow than a sheep.” Charlotte nodded over to the silent patients at the table next to theirs.

“How's the ham?” Luna pointed at unnaturally pink meat on Charlotte's plate.

“The ham's a sham.” Charlotte sighed, “Do you think there's a “I-Can't-Believe-It's-Not-Peanut-Butter?”

“That sounds gross...and like something they'd have here. Hey, Sandra.” Luna greeted an older British woman that had just sat down, already eating dessert.

“They had pie, Luna. Actual pie. I got the last piece.” Sandra sat and spoke with her mouth full of crust and a thick accent.

“This isn't pie,” Luna rolled her eyes, “ just like that's not butter. It's all a —” Luna was cut off by a loud wail two tables over. Instantly, two nurses appeared and escorted the new girl out of the cafeteria.

“Why'd she scream like that?” Sandra was still watching the empty doorway.

“There wasn't any pie left.” Charlotte whispered. The three of them stifled laughter and the cafeteria became noisy again.

“I miss cooking, you know? I mean, my kitchen is the size of a closet, and I hate it but it's



mine.” Luna said.

“I miss using actual tableware.” Sandra was attempting to stab a piece of crust with her plastic fork. She picked it up like a slice of pizza. “You’re right Luna, this isn’t pie.”

“I miss midnight snacks. Everyone’s asleep, you creep into the kitchen and eat ice cream out of the container.” Charlotte smiled deviously.

“I usually go for chips. Although Richard shows up shortly after.” Sandra dropped the rest of her crust onto her tray.

“So does, Jack.” Charlotte agreed.

“Ben’s usually already in the kitchen by the time I get there,” Luna smiled, but it immediately dropped off her face.

“I wonder if they’re all just milling around the kitchen, eating whole meals at 4 in the morning.” Charlotte said.

“I hope they are.” Luna sighed standing up, “I’ll see you guys later.” and headed for the door.

## **6 pm**

*If I could just find the chicken stock, maybe there’s some on the top shelf? Luna reached up to the top shelf of the cabinet, the stock just out of her reach. Her hand bumped a bag of chips and sent a torrent of crumbs down on Luna’s head. Crap, thought Luna, Verbena would eat them, it’s fine.*

*Verbena was with Ben, the house was empty and still. She tried to pull a chair over to the cabinet, but even that leverage wasn’t enough. Luna could feel her stomach clenching and took a deep breath. I’ll just work on the merengue for dessert then. She opened the fridge, gripping the handle tighter than usual, and removed the eggs. Two days past their expiration date. That’s probably not too bad, Luna thought, I’m sure they’re still good. But the fear and paranoia swept around her. Her heart raced, as she texted Ben asking for eggs and chicken stock. No reply. Idle hands, idle hands, Luna could feel her*

*stomach bubbling, her teeth grinding, her fists clenching over and over and over, and she erupted.*

*The kitchen blurred.*

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“Luna! Luna, are you okay? Are you...” Ben cradled Luna, she could feel herself screaming and sobbing, looking terrified at the smashed dishes and upturned chairs from the kitchen floor. There were shards of glass beneath Luna and she gripped them, blood soaking.

**7 pm**

“I think they might let me go tomorrow.” Luna looked at Ben's comforting outstretched hand, but stared at her own instead.

“Did the doctor say that? Did he say what time?” Ben eagerly pulled Luna close, but she still did not reciprocate. The clock on the imposing white wall ticked louder than ever, counting the seconds until Luna's only support system would disintegrate.

“Did my mother call? I don't have my phone. They...they took it.”

Ben cleared his throat audibly. The sound echoed around the cafeteria. “Yeah, she did. I said you had food poisoning.”

“Thank you.”

“Luna,” Ben glanced around cautiously and lowered his voice, “Luna, I think maybe I should tell her where you are. I'm worried she might try to stop by our place or —”

Luna cut him off. “Please don't.”

Ben went on rapidly. “She might get suspicious. Maybe she'd want to help. Maybe she could do something to —”

“Ben. Please, don't!” Luna raised her voice, the echo seemed harsher than she meant. “I...know this is difficult. I'm sorry. I'm just so damn sorry. I'm...” she faltered.

“This isn't your fault. You shouldn't even be here.”

“Shouldn't I?” Luna heard her voice crack, she wanted water but all she could think of was the ticking pulling Ben further away. They both glanced quickly at the bandages covering her arms. “This should've happened a long time ago. It was inevitable. I don't know how we lived like that. I'm...” Luna eyes burned, but she squeezed them shut and embraced Ben.

“Visiting hours are over, wrap it up!” The Rec time nurse called.

“Tomorrow?” Ben squeezed Luna's hand and helped her up.

“Maybe tomorrow.” Then the tears came.

**8 pm**

Luna walked back to her room, weighed down with extra clothing Ben had brought her, as well as a heavy heart. Charlotte was already curled up in bed, clutching several pieces of paper.

“Charlotte? You okay?” Luna sat on her own bed, she wasn't certain if their situational friendship was enough to come any closer. Luna heard Charlotte stifle a nearly inaudible sob. Luna walked over and crouched at the foot of Charlotte's bed. Charlotte wordlessly pushed the slightly crumpled papers towards Luna; there were four pages of children's drawings.

*We miss you Mommy, get better* – a vase of flowers decorated with hearts

*We luv u so much so does Penny* – a little girl held what Luna assumed to be a dog

*Can we bake kookys when you come home* – chocolate chip cookies and a smiling child

*Daddy made spugeti* – a plate of yellow curls and red scribbles

“That's...they're so sweet,” Luna wasn't sure what else she could possibly say, “Not so hot at

spelling though, huh?"

Charlotte smiled, "Jack's never been much of a speller."

"I'm sure he's a good enough substitute," Luna said, "I'd definitely give these drawings an A+"

Charlotte rolled on her side to face Luna, "Jack said they wanted to visit. I couldn't..bear to see them. Not like this."

Luna was quiet for a moment, and asked Charlotte the question that she'd wondered about her self since she arrived, "You're ashamed?"

Charlotte sighed deeply, "Aren't you?"

*It must shameful, to be locked up. To be deemed unfit for society. To live in a place with scheduled meals, bars on the window, and hourly night checks. An inability to make choices, both physically and mentally. It must be shame that keeps me from telling anyone I'm here. Isn't it?*

"Not anymore," Luna heard herself say, "I'm definitely not happy to be here, but I'm not miserable."

Luna went on, "At home, I think I *was*. Ben and I lived like that for so long, this...sad little bubble...and it popped. So now I'm here."

Luna paused a moment, listening to the sound of the blaring air conditioner.

"They make it look so easy." Luna said.

"Who does?" Charlotte asked, her voice muffled. She had buried her head in a pillow.

"Other people. 'Normal people'. Just getting out of the house some days is awful. How do people do it?" Luna leaned back against the bed.

"Does it matter? We don't know how." Charlotte asked, her voice still muffled.

"That doesn't make us crazy, though. Just because we...popped, doesn't mean we're *bad*. We're

just trying to fix our bubbles, you know?" Luna sighed, "I don't know."

"The new girl was muttering to herself during rec time, 'what goes up must come down'. Maybe she knows some hidden meaning to all this." Charlotte said, finally sitting up.

Luna smiled, "Maybe. She came in here and took your toothbrush about half an hour ago though. You should probably get a new one."

Charlotte laughed, "Dammit, how many is that already? She must be one of those hoarders."

"Movie time! Come on!" A nurse called down the hall. The nice rec time nurse peeked in.

"Everything okay in here? Are you up for a movie?" Charlotte nodded, put the drawings on her bedside table, and headed for the door. Luna moved to follow but was stopped by the nurse.

"Your husband has a surprise for you in the lobby."

"He..what?" Luna asked nervously, the acid in her stomach boiled.

"It's against regulations, so you'll have 5 minutes and have to have an attendant with you." He led Luna to the front door, past the movie room where a surplus nurse was turning on the TV. He punched in the code, unlocked the multitude of locks, and ushered Luna into the small lobby. Ben was standing with little Verbena shaking in his arms. Luna could hear several nurses questioning the rec time nurse in the doorway, but closed her eyes as she pulled Verbena into her arms.

## ***12 pm***

"Luna, sweetie?" A voice called over the noise of the common room. Luna glanced over at one of the surplus nurses.

"Exo. That's 32 on a triple letter." Sandra began placing the letters confidently on the scrabble board.

"Exo isn't a word, Sandra." Charlotte began removing the tiles.

"Of course it is. *Exoskeleton*. See?" Sandra snatched the tile back from Charlotte and began

placing them again.

“One moment,” Luna called to the nurse, “and it's not a word, San. Believe me, I've argued for hours about it.”

“Drat.” Sandra removed the tiles and studied her letters again.

“What the hell, San? That's what I said!” Charlotte said sourly.

“Mmm.” Sandra waved off Charlotte's protests, “detox. Yes. That's what we'll all be doing after this horrid mess.”

“There you go.” Luna nodded and followed the nurse to Dr. Timore's office.

“You shouldn't distress yourself, sweetie. Maybe something calmer and quieter, hm?” The nurse placed her hand on Luna's back. She bristled slightly.

“Calmer than scrabble. Right. Will do.” Luna reached for the door handle.

“That's a girl.” The nurse patted her back and walked down the hallway. Luna paused for a moment; that sentence didn't really make any sense. She entered the office.

Once again, Dr. Timore was scribbling away and the cold air blasted Luna immediately in the face. The furniture looked as cold and uninviting as ever. She wondered again if this room was frozen and furnished to enforce the feeling of captivity. Luna breathed in deeply, and took a seat without invitation.

“Good morning, Dr. Timore.” Luna dug her nails into her knees, calming herself. She would not let him have the upper hand; not this time.

Dr. Timore glanced up momentarily, sizing Luna up. She felt microscopically scrutinized and dug her nails even harder, perhaps drawing blood, but gave him a calm smile.

Luna's brazenness seemed to surprise Dr. Timore. He certainly had given her more of his attention in these five minutes than he had her entire last few visits. He cleared his throat loudly and picked up his pen like a totem.

“How are you feeling today, Luna?” Dr. Timore asked, his callousness returning. Luna considered the question for a minute and he paused in his writing.

“I’m feeling alright. Actually...good.” Luna said, partial honesty, partial hope, fully aware of the power he held, and may not be entirely conscious of.

“Good?” Dr. Timore repeated. He leaned back in his chair and surveyed Luna. Luna heard a buzzing again, perhaps it was in her head this time; but on top of Dr. Timore's chair sat a fly. Surely it couldn't have been the same fly from before. It crawled on to Dr. Timore's hair, matted down with at least several ounces of gel. He couldn't feel the fly. Luna could hardly keep it together, she let out a slight breathy chuckle. Her first real laugh.

Dr. Timore glanced suspiciously at Luna. She recovered quickly.

“Yes, I’ve been playing scrabble with Charlotte and Sandra. I love scrabble.” Dr. Timore merely nodded and thumbed presumably through Luna's file. *Why was it so thick already?*

“It says here you did not attend rec time yesterday afternoon.” Dr. Timore said. *Of course they wrote that, everything is documented here.*

“I had homework to do. It's finals this week.” Luna gripped harder.

Dr. Timore paused, “Have you completed it all?”

“No,” Luna said slowly, “it's very noisy and difficult to concentrate here.” She went on.

“Ben has been extremely supportive and discussed my...situation with my teachers and work; but there is only so much he can do on his own.” Luna was aware of the gravity of this moment, and waited, the fly was now orbiting Dr. Timore's head. It gave the impression of a dark halo.

Without speaking, Dr. Timore opened a drawer of his desk, and pulled out of long form.

“Fill this out, and return it to the front desk. They will forward it to your social worker.”

Luna breathed in sharply, “I can go home *today?*” Dr. Timore gave a curt nod, and scribbled in Luna's file before closing it.

“Thank you. Very much.” Luna removed herself from the chair, her knee still raw, and closed her eyes as she opened the door.

*End*