

# a cure for homesickness

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## a cure for homesickness

'You look rough,' says her supervisor.

'Sorry. Self-inflicted. I didn't take my probe tablet this morning.'

'*Jeez*. Why not?'

'Got distracted.'

'Why didn't you say something?'

'Thought I could handle it.' Helena drags her palms down her face. 'I'm wiped out. Headache coming on.'

'I could report you... Go back now. Take an early break.'

She retraces her walking commute through the platform's labyrinth. A dose of daylight might help, she thinks, but there's no chance of that. At the end of her fifteen-hour shift at 2700 hours she'll catch the last sunrays out on the viewing deck. Together with her co-workers she'll drain a couple of beers and watch the scintillating green sunset slowly calm and fade. Then there's Ray's farewell dinner, off-platform. Could be a late night.

She didn't bother with probe-and-fix tablets back home. Waste of money. Her mother pestered and even offered to pay but what was the point? Helena could tell by the colour of her urine if she was boozing too much. And her weight wasn't exactly a problem.

'Look, Mother, I know what I ought to do – a bit more exercise, drink more water, cut down on dairy. Save your money. I feel perfectly all right.' She relented when this new job came up because the variant probe was a condition of employment. At her interview, the recruiter described it as a 'plain psychological necessity' – the only way anyone copes with a thirty-eight-hour day.

I'm an idiot, forgetting to take it this morning, she thinks. As she trudges deeper, beyond the administration decks and towards the personnel quarters, she wonders what her mother might be doing. What time is it right now back home? She can never work it out.

At the end of shift, she decides, she'll message her mother and bring her up to date: debts paid off, cost of the return transport – more than covered. She'll be relieved.

Helena takes the stairs two at a time. Her headache is thickening.

Lately she has considered extending her contract to help rack up her savings. Most people stay longer than they initially intended. I'll broach the idea, she says to herself. See how Mother reacts.

Eight years ought to be enough – eight *home* years, that is. She's done the maths. But she knows if she can just stretch to ten her wage-monkey days will be over.

*Then* I can focus on my health.

And, for the first time since she arrived six years ago, she remembers her mother singing in the kitchen. It *had* to be a Tuesday; she always baked on a Tuesday, however tired she felt. Always scones and... Unbelievable, she thinks. I'd forgotten about bread and butter pudding; my favourite. Come to think of it, the food here is kind of... disappointing. No, it's way worse than that!

Helena is tempted to send an apology and cry off Ray's dinner this evening. Why make the effort for three courses of barely mediocre food?

When was the last time, she wonders, that she truly enjoyed her food? She recalls a lunch she once had on holiday with... that cool guy. What was his...? Though she can't remember his name, she sees a white-clothed table on a cramped narrow veranda, which overlooks a steep wooded valley. She mouths the words, 'Per primo, una zuppa di verdure per favore, di secondo, insalata di Cesari con Pollo, e da bere, vino bianco di Orvieto e una bottiglia di acqua mineral frizzante. Grazie.' And, to herself, 'I love Italy. Long lunches... under the shade of vines.'

Each footstep creates a shock wave that passes through her body and reverberates inside her skull. But she still manages to smile. Those fields of sleepy sunflowers. And those crazy frescoes in...? A green-faced devil eating a naked man, whole, head first. She places one hand on her head to dampen the pain.

Why these memories? God! I hope I'm not homesick.

On the final stretch towards her living quarters she detects a metallic smell with hints of synthetic freshener disguising staleness. An industrial smell, a hermetically-sealed-environment-type smell. She hasn't noticed it before. She lifts her right hand, pushes errant strands from her face and, fleetingly, she imagines a fresh salty breeze blowing along the corridor. She licks her lips.

As she opens the door to her windowless quarters she stalls and appraises the narrow steel-framed bed with its off-white bedding, the narrow desk – little more than a shelf – and the bare steel floor. This isn't fucking minimal. It's dire. She kicks a shoe across the room.

The probe-and-fix tablet lies by the sink. So, I *did* take one out of the bottle. But no prize for that. The tablet looks like a piece of hard shiny toffee but it tastes more like fudge. She swallows it without water and reaches for her toothbrush. A hesitation. She doesn't have time.

Out into the corridor, deserted at mid-shift, she takes long strides towards the first of many flights of stairs. As she takes her first step up, she halts. William; he was called William.

And three steps higher she stops again. It wasn't bread and butter pudding. My favourite was rice pudding with a burnt skin. Is she making rice pudding today? Is it Tuesday at home?

Back at her workstation, Helena pulls up her day's assignment, deletes her earlier substandard work and starts from scratch. She feels no trace of a headache. Fast work, she thinks. I'll not make that mistake again. She kicks the table leg to check there's no knock-on pain inside her head. No. All clear.

In truth, she now admits to herself, she grew to like burnt skin on rice pudding only because Mother served it so often; an acquired taste born of repeated kitchen oversights. Why didn't she ever set a timer?

She shifts in her chair so that her back is straight, her feet flat on the floor. And William... nothing came of that little fling. Though Italy was lovely, except for the insect bites and those bloody noisy neighbours.

Helena flicks her assignment aside and brings up her contract of employment. She finds the paragraph header: *Contract duration*.

A few yards away, her supervisor looks up from a conversation and raises her eyebrows at Helena. She replies with a thumb's up.

There's no real reason to rush home, she decides. In the tiny on-screen box that allows for two numerals, she overwrites 8 with 11 and submits her request for a three-year extension.

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