

**This
Sickness
Will Not
End in
Death**

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The first confirmed suicide was a round-faced boy named Manny, who collected bottle caps and liked to play chess and had two younger brothers. The boys were all born here, citizens of no nation. Manny sped a borrowed bicycle into the side of a water truck and died from a brain bleed. He was ten. We ruled it a suicide because he left a note—"Sorry, Mama"—on the table in his family's shipping container.

The attempt was, in retrospect, Manny's second. I went through our logs and found that his mother had brought him into the clinic the year before, after Manny had eaten poison stolen from rat traps around the butcher's shop. The nosebleeds gave him away and Doctor Mendoza rushed him to the hospital where they were able to save his life. Once he had recovered, the hospital doctors sent Manny home, and thinking he was just a little slow, told him not to eat things he found on the ground. I remember Doctor Mendoza, before she left the camp, being confused by a nine-year-old eating poison, but she couldn't conceive that Manny had done so on purpose.

But his suicide changed what we thought possible. We had until then been stumped by a group of four- and five-year-olds who came down with what appeared to be recurring, treatment-resistant cases of chicken pox. The same children would appear again and again at the clinic, their limbs and faces covered in scabs. We'd tell the parents to wait it out. Reinfections sometimes do occur. After Manny's note, we realized the obvious: They didn't have chicken pox. It was self-harm. The children were scratching themselves raw. We put Band-Aids over their fingernails and sent them back to school.

Once we knew what to look for, we saw it everywhere. Two girls disfigured their mouths chewing broken soda bottles. A boy cracked his permanent molars eating rocks. A girl underwent emergency surgery to remove an intestinal blockage caused by the plastic bags she had been eating; she died anyway. One boy ate a small lizard because, he told me, he thought it was poisonous. It wasn't, but the scales made him throw up a lot. Many children chewed pieces of old tires. A boy put out his eye with a rusty nail. A five-year-old plucked all her hair, strand by strand, even her eyebrows and eyelashes. Children came to the clinic with snakebites on their hands instead of their ankles. Mothers complained about coming home to their containers and being unable to cook, their gas canisters empty and their daughters woozy. Several boys lost fingers and toes after it became popular to tie shoelaces around one's digits, cutting off the circulation for days. Every child in the camp began to wet the bed seemingly at once. We took all the scissors away and told fathers to hide their razors. And still swarms of children chased soccer balls around the camp with crisscross scars on their thighs and forearms.

I took it on myself to catalogue these injuries. I had plenty of free time with the clinic's computer because I took the slow graveyard shift my second year at the camp, after I found I slept better during the day. The tremors from the tunnel-busting bombs disrupted my sleep more than sunlight. I used the time between patients to log the cases in spreadsheets and put thumbtacks into a handmade map of the camp, hoping to find a pattern: a tire eater here, by the butcher's street, siblings who inhaled gas there, on the street with the popcorn man. I pestered the dayshift medics to keep better notes on our patient's camp addresses.

I also took the overnight shift because of the overnight nurse, Maggie, who helped me keep notes. She was a broad-shouldered, curly-haired insomniac with whom I was in love. She was married and I was not.

I remember a lot of things from our time trying to help the camp's children. The clinic's slow computer, an opaque Tupperware

full of Band-Aids, the smell of new rubber gloves, the frayed cuffs of my denim jacket, so many dirty little fingernails, my inverted sense of day and night. But most of all I remember Maggie's hiking pants and the curl of her upper lip when she laughed.

I learned a lot from her. She was great with the children—once she was treating a young boy who had stuck a rock up his nose when the clinic began to shake from a too-close bomb. The boy was scared. Maggie fanned her rear and said she'd eaten too many beans. The boy laughed. She taught me how to take a patient history and how to pull someone's forearm taut to keep a vein from rolling. (At times we were so short on doctors and nurses that even I, with no medical training, learned the basics.) I showed her how to stand up and stare at the door, as if expecting someone else, to get talkative patients to leave an exam room. It was a trick I learned during my years as a high-school teacher.

"This too shall pass," Maggie liked to say, in just about any circumstance. A bomb, a stomachache, a frozen computer, another bowl of rice for dinner—all things passed.

"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," I liked to say back, in just about any circumstance, although especially when the computer unfroze. It was a game we played to pass the time between patients.

"It is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword," when grabbing a pen or a syringe or a scalpel.

"And it was good," when turning on the clinic's lights.

"The snake is eating its own tail," she'd say in moments of despair, as when Manny died and we realized the children were hurting themselves on purpose. "One day it will starve."

This one she seemed to really believe. She said it to reassure patients and parents and our volunteer medics and me that this, the camp and the impermanence and uncertainty of existence there, could not last. The politics of now were not the politics of forever.

"The snake is eating its own tail," I'd repeat.

Maggie flew home to her husband every few months. I was

miserable without her. It's a funny feeling to live in a refugee camp without being a refugee yourself. I lived like everyone else. I slept in a storage container and put fabric on its walls to dull the echo, I ate rice and shopped at the makeshift shops and watched a lot of TV, I played chess with old men and children, and I lost a tremendous amount of weight. But my shoes fit—that was always the giveaway. I grew embarrassed by my shoes, as though I were flaunting unimaginable wealth by wearing correct-sized Converse sneakers.

Maggie was like me, both here and not. If she felt the same sense of shame that I did, she didn't let it show, and her ease made me feel better about it all. I counted down the days until she'd come back.

Looking back it seems strange and crass to have thought about love at all while living among so much suffering—to have thought of anything besides the suffering, the suffering of children, the suffering of old women, of young women, of men, of mothers and fathers. But I suppose that just like we become used to the love of a partner and take it for granted, we can become used to suffering in the same way. These once life-altering horrors had become ordinary to me—a mark on a spreadsheet, a little wooden box, a broken bike beneath a water truck, the wheezing of a small boy who was not me. I was used to diarrhea, vomit, blood under my fingernails, needles, dead children. I learned to live with it. The children learned to live without their amputated fingers.

But then again, perhaps neither love nor suffering ever really becomes ordinary. I went to Manny's burial with Maggie, a Sunday morning after our shift. As his cousins and little brothers shoveled dirt onto the little wooden box and his mother wept, I remember I began to pray to myself an unholy prayer. Perhaps God might undo this one horror, I asked. "Come forth." I whispered the command in my heart, the same one that Lazarus obeyed. "Manny, come forth." I knew it was impossible and grotesque and still I hoped to see the lid shake and the little boy come out. The disciples could raise the dead.

I believed. Why not here? Why not this prayer? Could I not stop this suffering?

Of course the box did not shake. No one answered my prayer. Maggie asked me what I was saying to myself. I didn't tell her. Children have died before, they die now, and they will die in the future. The grave was filled, we all left, and there little Manny's body remains for all eternity.

II

Manny was a warning shot. But the first true crisis started with an eleven-year-old in our district, Jessica, who figured out how to strangle herself with a door handle and her school backpack. She had been dead for hours before her mother found her and carried her body to us. She screamed for me to help her daughter. I tried to explain there was nothing to do, her daughter was gone, but she kept screaming. I did CPR until we got a car to drive her to the hospital. I don't know why I did the compressions. The mother was pleading, begging, as though I had killed her child and I alone could bring her back. I pumped harder and harder on the girl's chest and to this day I can feel in my hands the moment her ribs snapped and her chest gave way. Jessica's t-shirt had unicorns on it. Her eyes were open. I slept on the floor of Maggie's storage container for a week.

Three more children repeated the act. We told the schools to cut the straps off their backpacks. The children had to carry their school supplies by hugging the now-strapless backpacks to their chests and it reminded me of a prank we used to play in high school. We'd empty someone's backpack, turn it inside out, and refill it, so that our victim had to rush with his inside-out backpack pressed against his chest to his next class. Now I watched an army of children run about in the same way and it seemed almost funny to me, even though I knew the reasons for it weren't funny at all. They were the worst reasons in the world.

Suffering was ordinary. Strapless backpacks were new.

Cutting the straps wasn't enough. The children kept finding new ways to hurt themselves. Kitchen knives, matches, stray dogs, cars, rusty bikes. They were creative and they had a lot of free time. We had no mental health counselors in the camp and couldn't find any among the residents, so I contacted every therapist in the city whose email address I could find to see if any could come to the camp to train the staff and the teachers in childhood CBT basics, or was at least willing to do so on a video call. No one replied. Maggie and I made a CBT basics sheet that we gave to the schoolteachers and suggested they spend a half-hour each day reviewing it with the children. I have no idea whether practicing "good posture" helped but it was one of the few tools we had. Maggie maintained that it did. She was, oddly, a proponent of the more pseudo-scientific parts of yoga.

"We could try placebos?" she suggested at the end of one night, as we consolidated the rubber gloves into one box. She had just treated a girl who tried to eat a cell phone battery but only managed to cut up her gums. "Give the parents fake happy pills to give to the kids?"

"Would that work on children?" I asked.

"It might be more effective, because they're children. But it also might not work at all, because they're children," she sighed.

I said I'd looked online for research on the subject.

"I don't know that we could even get sugar pills," she said. "We don't have enough real medication. I just don't know what to do."

"Maybe we could fill up bags with 'medicinal' rice? Tell them to take a grain a day?"

"Maybe," she said. "We have a lot of rice."

An older woman came into the clinic complaining of a cough that had kept her up all night. Maggie looked for an intake form.

"A sword, please," she asked, putting the form into her clipboard.

"Ape must not kill ape, Dr. Zaius," I said, tossing a pen to her.

The woman looked at us curiously. She didn't speak English. Maggie took her into the back, examined her, and sent the woman away with pills and an order to rest and eat carrots if she could find them.

“What about a project?” I logged the respiratory infection. “Something for the kids to build. Anything that gives them a sense of self-determination and something to do other than think of ways to hurt themselves.”

An explosion shook the walls and knocked my pens off the desk. Maggie waited for the clinic to stop shaking before she answered. They were bombing again. I thought of the people trying to cross in tunnels.

“A theatre program?” she suggested.

“Some might be too young for that. How about a playground?”

We looked up playground plans online, something the children could make with old car tires. They looked complicated.

Another crisis put our playground idea on hold. We woke up one afternoon to find the government had bulldozed the whole nineteenth district, which was outside the “established boundary” of the camp. There was no reason to do this—the camp didn’t have official boundaries because it didn’t officially exist, according to the government. It was even forbidden to make a map of the camp, as if making a map would make the camp more real. I hid mine in the clinic desk for that reason. But the new president had campaigned to do “something” about the migrant crisis, and this was a “something” sufficiently mean to appease his voters.

We had a migrant crisis on top of a migrant crisis. We were overwhelmed with new patients. Every relocated child from the nineteenth district had a diagnosable eating disorder or self-harm disorder or both, and we saw a new influx of children from our own district who had started eating dog feces. They’d laugh at the word “poop” when I asked whether they knew what they were eating. They didn’t seem to understand it was making them sick. We asked people to pick up dog droppings whenever they saw them.

“When does it stop?” I said one night, counting that week’s cases of self-harm in my spreadsheet and putting them on a new map. I suspected that a group of children living by the TV repair shop had

found and hidden a razor blade they were now sharing. “God, when does it stop?”

Maggie looked at me from across the room with alarm—I was shouting, I realized. I hadn’t been sleeping and I felt like someone had locked me in a running dryer for weeks and I had finally tumbled out, sweating and claustrophobic and the whole world still spinning. I felt like I didn’t know which way was up.

“Sorry,” I said. I turned back to my spreadsheet.

Maggie vanished into exam room. She returned with scissors.

“I taped them under a chair,” she said. “Can you trim my split ends?”

I said I would. She sat in my chair and I stood behind her.

“This sickness will not end with death,” she said, as I examined her hair. “We’ll figure it out.”

“The snake is eating its own tail,” I replied, snipping a half-inch off everywhere. I had no idea what a split end looked like. But I loved to hold her hair between my fingers, and concentrating on the work of the scissors made the world stand still.

“I thought more about the playground,” she said. “But I’m worried now it’s too dangerous for the children. Too many ways to hurt themselves.”

“What about a baseball league?” I suggested.

“What about a baseball league. How about a cup of caw-fee?” she said.

“Don’t forget who’s holding the scissors.”

“No,” she teased, spinning the chair toward me and grabbing my free hand. Her palm was electric. I realized it’d been months since I’d touched another person. “The bats might be a bad idea.”

“Soccer?” I said, trying to even out the bottom of her hair. “Football, I mean.”

“All we’d need are nets. We have enough footballs already.”

We had more donated soccer balls than we could ever use, but no goals; thousands of bicycles and no pumps; millions of crayons and no paper. Piles of old XXL shirts that didn’t fit anyone in the

camp. But never enough food or medicine.

“We could have the kids make their uniforms from the big t-shirts,” I said. “And the goals, they could help paint those if we get someone to make them.”

“Where can we put the fields?” she asked.

“The bulldozed district? We’ll get permits.

“We could pitch it as a way to prevent people from moving back in. Wouldn’t the government like that?”

I said I’d talk to the welder who lived on the butcher’s street about the goals and to the tailor on the school street about the uniforms. Maggie said she’d make an appointment with the camp administrator and talk to the teachers.

“This too shall pass,” she said.

“Thus speaketh the constipated man,” I said, and then declared the split ends eradicated.

The roof rattled from a distant tunnel-bomb and we both jumped. This explosion felt closer than normal. We waited to see whether they’d be another one.

“The snake is eating its own tail,” we said at the same time.

The welder was a bald man with smile lines, a bad tic, and no top teeth. He still had the sharp gum outline for his teeth, as if all had just been pulled. I didn’t ask. His shop was full of bike wheels in various states of repair. He said he would make the soccer goals for free if we brought him the metal. He told me a big strong man like me should have no problem finding metal, and that his daughter would have liked me.

We got to work. Every morning after our shifts, Maggie and I went to the ruins of the nineteenth district and collected as much scrap metal as we could fit into a wheelbarrow—wire, broken bicycles, pipes, a sheet of chain-link fence. We made friends with a stray dog who would bring me a stick to throw over and over until he’d exhaust himself and go lie in the shade. Maggie named him Snake because he’d chase his own tail when I didn’t throw a stick fast

enough. We'd collect metal in the morning, sleep for a few hours, and work in the clinic at night. Maggie called the administrator's office four times a day until they confirmed an appointment at the end of the month. We had the teachers begin a sewing class, and the children, who loved the idea of a real soccer league, started to make the uniforms. Juan, a clever boy of twelve and a reformed tire eater, made uniforms for referees and declared himself in charge of officiating. We had the older children create a league schedule. It seemed to work. In my spreadsheets, I noted a small but significant drop in injured children and almost none of the children involved with the league came to us with self-inflicted injuries.

After a few weeks the welder told us he could make a dozen full-sized and child-sized soccer goals with the metal we'd brought him. He showed us the pieces of the goals he'd made already. They were ugly, he said, running a hand along the twisted metal, but they were sturdy. He did a pull-up on a small goal to demonstrate and showed us the hooks from which we could hang the nets. We would have our soccer goals. The children would have their league. Maggie threw her arms around me and kissed my cheek.

III

Our appointment with the administrator was at noon. We took the bus into the city after our shift and waited in the lobby of the government building. We rehearsed again what to say, how the potential benefits for the government came at no cost. We reassured each other that we were not nervous. We waited for hours. Maggie fell asleep on my shoulder and I shivered in the A/C. I had forgotten what conditioned air smelled like. At three, we were brought into a small waiting room outside the administrator's office. At four, the lieutenant administrator ushered us into her office. She told us that the administrator was away for the day but she would take the meeting for him. She sat behind her desk and indicated for us to sit across from her. I straightened the papers we had put together in our least-creased manila

folder. Everything for the league was ready—nets, uniforms, teams, coaches, referees—and all we needed was permission to build the fields. We waited as she looked at her computer. The official portrait of the president hung crooked behind her on the wall.

The dim lights in the ceiling flickered and I shuddered. Children had started climbing utility poles in the last month. We didn't know how they figured it out, but all at once they began to race up the service ladders to reach for the power lines. The lights in the clinic would dim and we'd know we'd be getting a body. Eventually. Sometimes a child wouldn't fall off for a day because children are light and muscles in their hands would stay clenched on the wires. It wasn't safe to pull them down. We just had to wait until they fell.

The lieutenant administrator looked up suddenly, as if she'd forgotten we were there.

"You're here for a permit?" she asked, sorting through papers on her desk.

"Yes," Maggie said. "We wanted to build soccer fields for a children's soccer league. In the camp."

I handed her our folder. She flipped through it once and set it aside. She went back to her computer, as though concerned with something else.

"You're referring to the area outside the city?" she finally said.

"Yes," Maggie said. "The refugee camp."

"And you want to build soccer fields?"

"Yes," Maggie said.

The woman looked at us and frowned. "Is this outside the established area?"

"We hoped to build them in the former nineteenth district," I said. "We thought it'd be a good place for the soccer fields because it's flat and it's been cleared already."

"It would keep the children out of trouble," Maggie added.

"And it'd prevent people from moving back in," I said. "And we think providing something for the children is a win for the government."

“Ah,” said the woman. “Well that unfortunately is the problem.”

“What is?” said Maggie.

The woman sighed and looked at us. “I just don’t know that it’s politically feasible.”

“Politically feasible?” I asked. “A children’s soccer league?”

She rubbed her temples. “The camp, as you call it, is a temporary and unsustainable solution. We can’t allow any expansion—anything that might appear to lend the camp a sense of permanence. This situation will resolve itself only when the people go home. We can’t afford anything that would delay that.”

“Temporary?” I said. “We have seven-year-olds who were born in the camp. We’ve buried children who were born in the camp.”

Maggie touched my arm. I sat back in my chair.

“Respectfully,” Maggie said, “we’re asking only to build soccer fields. They’re hardly permanent structures. The nets are small and movable, and at most we’d add benches. We would like permission, or at least an assurance that it’s not going to be destroyed overnight.”

“Perhaps you can build the soccer fields within the camp’s existing boundaries?” she said.

I laughed. “It’d be easier to build them in this office. There’s barely room to walk down the street now that the nineteenth district is gone.”

“I wish things were different,” the lieutenant administrator said with an exhausted insincerity. “But it’s just the political reality.”

“What about unofficially?” Maggie said. “If we build the fields, can we have an off-the-record assurance that you won’t bulldoze them?”

The lieutenant administrator shook her head no.

“Can we speak to the administrator and hear his thoughts?” Maggie asked. “I don’t think we’re making unreasonable—”

“I can assure you I speak for him on this matter,” the lieutenant said sharply.

She slid our folder back across the desk, stood up and looked at the door. She hadn’t even read the proposal. She hadn’t seen that our arguments were compelling, emotional, airtight. There was no

way anyone could say no if they really considered them. I felt a heat and dizziness in my chest, as though I'd once again been tossed from the running dryer and I felt like the only thing with hot blood inside this dim office.

"That's bullshit," I said suddenly. "The political reality? Are you kidding me? We're trying to give these children the smallest sense of self-determination so they stop killing themselves and you can't even look at our proposal."

"Please," Maggie said to me.

"It's the will of the voters," the woman said, gesturing at the door.

"It's the will of the voters to deny dying children soccer fields?" I said. "For fuck's sake, let us build the damn soccer fields. We're not asking for help or money. We just want you to say you won't knock them down."

"I want to go," Maggie whispered.

"It's complicated, and you are not from here," said the lieutenant.

"It's not complicated," I said. "It's not."

She glared at me curiously, as if I were a stupid zoo animal pounding on thick glass.

I picked up my chair and slammed it down closer to her desk, and then sat in it. "I'm not leaving until we can build these fucking soccer fields," I said.

The lieutenant sighed, unmoved, and went back to her computer. Maggie stood and pulled on my arm to go but I didn't move. I wasn't going to leave until she read our proposal.

"Look at me," I said. "Look at the proposal. Tell me why we can't build these fields."

She typed on her keyboard.

"*Look at it,*" I shouted at her and kicked the front of the desk.

"Please," Maggie said, pulling at my shirt.

The lieutenant, without looking at me, took her phone off the hook and pushed a button. A moment later two large men in uniforms came into the room. They had big guns on their backs. One pulled me from the chair, holding my arm behind me as I struggled.

The other kned me in the stomach. I doubled over and all the air left my body. The same man kned me in the stomach again and I threw up. I felt the burning of vomit entering my lungs when I gasped for air that wouldn't come. They dropped my face in my vomit. Then one of them hit my back with the butt of his gun when I struggled to get up and I fell into the vomit again. They dragged me from the building and down the stairs and dropped me on the sidewalk outside.

I lay on the hot concrete. One of the men pointed his gun at me and pushed the barrel into my cheek.

"Please," I said.

He spat and lowered the gun. They left me on the sidewalk.

I crawled to the side of the building, gasping in pain. Maggie helped me sit up and she sat next to me. She was crying. The sun felt like white fire in my eyes and my lungs burned and the world was still spinning but I was not. People hurried by, pretending not to see us.

"I'm sorry," I wheezed. "I'm sorry."

Maggie used her shirt to wipe my face. I couldn't look at her. Every breath hurt. I tried to take shallow breaths, but it wasn't enough air. I gasped and the pain washed back through my chest. Maggie felt for broken ribs but I pushed her arm away.

"We'll tell someone—government officers just assaulted a camp volunteer," she said.

"She'll say I threatened her."

"We'll go to the newspapers."

"No one will care," I said.

"We care," she said. "You care."

I shook my head.

A policeman told us to move along. We walked to the bus stop and waited in silence.

"The snake is eating its own tail," Maggie said, breaking our silence as we rode the bus back to the camp. "It can't forever."

I stared out the open window. I tried to take shallow breaths to avoid inflating my chest. I felt dust in my nose and my shirt smelled

like vomit and the bus itself smelled thick with the beers of the men commuting back to the camp.

“This is just a setback,” she continued. “We have the goals. We have uniforms.”

But I knew we weren’t going to build the fields. The government would just knock them down like an anthill. We weren’t going to save the children. I was a weakling and a coward who just got worked over by two cavemen thugs. This sickness was bigger than us both and nothing was ever going to change and I knew it the whole time—I knew it the whole time but I had let myself be fooled, let the children be fooled, all because of a woman with pretty hair.

“If they destroy the goals we can make more,” Maggie said.

“For fuck’s sake,” I said. “Can’t you see the snake is eating us? It’s eating us. We’re the fucking tail. Everyone in this fucking camp will be dead before the snake starves. Every single person.”

“We can still appeal,” she said. “We’ll build the soccer fields. We’ll build more goals, build more fields if they bulldoze them. You can’t give up. We can’t.”

“Appeal to who? The fucking president?”

“Stop it,” she said.

“Why? It’s the truth no matter how many times you say otherwise.”

“Why don’t you go home if that’s how you feel?” she said.

“Why don’t you? I don’t have a home. You do. You’ve been one foot in and one foot out the whole time.”

Maggie started to cry. “Please don’t shout at me.”

The passengers around us gawked openly at these two people shouting in English.

“Sorry,” I said to her. I don’t think I sounded the least bit sincere but I was. “Maggie, I’m sorry.”

We didn’t talk the rest of the bus ride. She cried to herself. I looked out the window at the river and the fence and the grids of shipping containers rising like tombstones. Our city in the desert, one that did not officially exist, for children of no nation that no one wanted.

Maggie and I didn't talk that night during our shift. We did the next night, although just with small greetings and now-hollow jokes. We said nothing about how to tell the children there would be no soccer league.

Maggie went home on leave the following week and then she never came back to the camp. She stopped replying to my emails. But a lot of volunteers do that after they leave. She probably felt she'd failed somehow. That's how I feel now. I don't respond to any emails either.

After Maggie left, I decided I'd build the soccer fields myself, permits be damned, Maggie be damned, the administrator and her thugs be damned. I'd do it alone. I'd stand down the bulldozers, like Tiananmen Square. I'd buy a gun and keep shooting until something changed. I'd shoot the bulldozer driver, and I'd shoot the guards, and I'd shoot the lieutenant administrator, and the administrator, and the governor, and I'd figure it out from there. I thought about killing the president of my country and the president of this country. I thought about killing all the fools who'd voted for this—forcing them to eat glass, forcing them to strangle themselves with a child's backpack, forcing them to be bitten by snakes. I thought mostly about killing the guards who beat me up.

I stopped sleeping. I felt like I was in the dryer all the time. They detonated explosives all day and all night. We kept getting thirty-year-old gunshot victims who tried to cross the border and eleven-year-olds who'd bite off their own tongues, rape victims and starving old women. We had two women and a girl all named Maria die in our clinic within two hours of each other one night and it didn't even seem that weird to me. It was ordinary. Everything was ordinary. Nothing broke the spell anymore.

I kept bringing metal to the welder and I piled the finished goals in the nineteenth district. The teachers told me to forget about the soccer league for now, but still I cleared the space for a field and, after a few close calls, started clearing out the snakes too. I'd find

one, lure it out and take the shovel and slam it down, cutting the snake in two. Sometimes the severed heads would twitch after, the mouths opening and closing, trying to lunge at me as they went flaccid. I'd get down close and watch. It was beautiful. The dryer kept spinning. I started killing non-venomous snakes, and lizards, and rats too because I liked it so much. I'd finish clearing space for soccer fields once I'd exterminated everything dangerous in the area.

The government talked about demolishing the whole camp. The ten-year-olds learned to cut their wrists open in water. Tying off fingers until they turned black came back into fashion. I threw away my maps. I ran out of snakes and then one day I killed a stray dog with the shovel. I beat it to death. It jumped out and surprised me and I swung the shovel once in surprise and then again in self-defense and then I couldn't stop myself.

That didn't feel ordinary though. That felt different. The dryer stopped spinning then.

I sat in the clinic alone the night after I killed and buried the dog. We had just received a three-months supply of antidiarrheals and ibuprofen and I sorted the bottles away, and then I counted out bandages. I was the only person on duty. We were short on volunteers. A father brought in his son, a seven-year-old, who'd been slicing the soles of his feet with a kitchen knife.

"What can I do?" the father asked as I washed and bandaged the boy's feet. The cuts weren't deep enough for stitches. The father's name was José. He ran a store that sold fresh popcorn. Maggie and I used to visit to smell the oil and watch the kernels pop. I don't remember the boy's name, but I remember he pulled his bloody feet away from my cold hands and giggled. They never stopped being children.

José was shaking his head and looking at his son.

"How could he do this?"

"It's a control thing," I said. "It helps him feel in control."

“What can I do?”

“Let him pick out his own clothes?” I offered lamely. “Let him help cook?”

José shook his head. “He’s seven.”

“The snake is eating its own tail,” I muttered. “One day it will starve.”

José nodded at this. He believed. He still believed that this would all pass.

“But not before it’s done with us,” I added.

The boy’s shoes didn’t fit over the bandages, so I gave him my Converse. I told him to bring them back when his feet were better.

I took a bottle of ibuprofen home with me and sat for an hour alone in my container, reading the bottle’s label over and over. I knew how many it’d take and I also knew it wouldn’t be immediate and I might throw them up. Someone would find me. Would someone find me?

I decided to find new shoes instead. I took the bus into the city but somehow I ended up in a brothel where I was arrested, and I spent the night in jail. And then I never did make it back.

