

The Last Day of Esther Levin

by Deborah Jiang-Stein

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 2, 9:00 p.m.

If it weren't so dark now, I'd go outside. One day it'll be easier but right now, not for a long time, it's not in me.

"Gotta face the fear," I tell myself, "try." But then, no. I don't.

I have no proof but I got my certainty. One day I'll walk out of here, free of it all.

I can take the rain, the cold, even the rare bullet hailstorm that nails Seattle in the winter. But nighttime isn't for me. I stay awake in the dark in my one-room apartment here and watch the evening through my narrow slot window, watch all night, then sleep in the day.

I taped the other four windows with duct tape. All waterproof and airtight so the dark can't leak in, can't sneak in like a thief and rob my peace.

I live in the short end of the L-shape, third floor, on the top story of this hundred-unit apartment building. It's the oldest part of this rickety joint, but there's an up side to everything. Means our wing is next for a round of improvements, maybe a new coat of paint.

This must be the oldest building on earth, the way it needs to be fixed. Even though I don't have any reason to go out, they could at least fix my door. It's stuck.

It's easy to find me. Right below the over sized peephole on the

outside of my door I duct-taped an arrow. It points to my waist level mail slot. Then above this, ESTHER LEVIN in big block letters. I go by Franki, but mail always comes with the formal name.

Duct tape gives my name a silver sheen to remind the world, "Hi, it's me, and don't forget I'm in here."

Toby across the hall slides in my mail for me. She does me the favor twice a week. Maybe someday I'll do something for her.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 2, 10:45 p.m.

Do I ever need some new clothes. Who wants to wear the same thing day in, day out? What about new pajamas? Silky ones. If I owned some, I'd crouch at the base of my five by two-foot horizontal slot window, all sexy in silk, squat at my window under the full blood moon in the night sky, and press myself into the ledge and grind until I come — my only freedom. From here I can witness the world, a wide wedge of devil pie.

Last night, just after midnight when I rocked myself under my window, the new neon sign on the rooftop across the alley cast its glow right into my eyes, right through Seattle's overcast sky. Damn high-intensity sign keeps me from more than a good come. Can't get off or sky gaze with the neon buzz, how it outshines the stars.

On a clear night, the sign mirrors its letters on my wall, the reflection a dance, one more reason to stay awake, the neon flash on my wall of
West Seattle Psychiatric Hospital

Twenty-eight years pocketed in this building. The up side is, at least I'm not in that place.

MONDAY OCTOBER 3, 10 a.m.

Monday morning, my day for handstands. Right in the middle of my room, I shoot my feet in the air, happy I don't need to prop my heels against the wall for balance. Blood to my head gives me a whole brand new view of the world.

The Super in this joint runs this place as if he's the principal and we're all a bunch of kindergarten kids. He's one in a long line of supers, every one of them with the same uppity attitude. About time a woman ran things around here.

Everything about him gets on my nerves. So I keep my door locked with the back of my favorite chair, my only chair propped underneath the doorknob. I make sure he can't get in. The weirdo.

The way he treats me, I don't care if I never go out again because I'd have to pass right by his office if I stepped out of my apartment. He sits in his glass office at the end of the hall like he's king of the universe, tilted back in his chair, his feet propped up on the edge of his desk, jaws in a chomp and chew into his wad of gum like it's a cud, while he scratches his sweaty balls through his polyester pants. I oughta swipe his smirk right off his face, his greasy grin that he slathers across his mug.

MONDAY OCTOBER 3, 12:40 p.m.

I'd swear Toby used to drop my mail through there, my mail slot every day about this time. What's this hand?

Fingers slip a tray of food through my mail slot...something's different. A new Super? Or did Toby move?

I slide the flat rectangle through the slot and it's no envelope, but a plastic tray with a paper bowl of two slices of bologna, a thin slice of white cheese and two slices of bread. Make my own sandwich, why not? Boiled carrots and applesauce plopped into the same paper bowl. Tasty.

"Thanks for lunch!" I shout, loud enough so Toby can hear me in the hall. No one answers.

I stretch out on my bed, munch a slice of lunch meat, and eye the afternoon sun rays as they slant through my window. I've pencil-lined where the rays hit my wall and over the years I've lived here, my sketches mark a semi-circle of all my days and seasons.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2:59 p.m.

Another tray slides through my mail slot as a woman's voice calls out, "Esther Levin. Meds."

A paper cup full of pills wobbles next to a second cup half full of water.

"It's not like I can't get my own water," I yell through the opening. Two eyes watch me from the other side of my door through the slot.

"Down the hatch," the woman says, "the water too."

I hold the cup and swirl the tablets in a circle, almost dizzy as they spin around the side of the paper cup like a NASCAR race in slow motion

"Toss it," she says again, "or you'll lose your outside time."

"Who's she kidding?" I think. Didn't she read my chart? "I don't go

outside!" I yell through the slot.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2:25 p.m.

If it's not sexy pajamas, at least I could use a separate bathroom instead of this sink and toilet right here in my one room. I know there's gotta be space on the other side of one of my walls to open into a separate little bathroom. I don't need much, don't even mind anymore about the shower share. But a new white toilet and sink instead of this stainless steel attached unit, this would really flip my trigger.

I've never pulled the kind of trigger you think. Don't figure I'm here for that.

There's gotta be another way to get out of here if I can't get over the fear, the dark. Some way out of here.

Words I say now every night before sleep descends. There's got to be a way out of this six by eight-foot tin can on death row.

I deserve to be here.

See, thing is, when I followed my plan a year later, the explosion took them all, my parents, older sister, even the cat. I sat on the top of the hill behind our house and waited for the police to come get me.

I was seventeen, and wrong about how they might take me back into foster care. In Washington State, there's the death penalty.

I get to choose — lethal injection or hanging. I've had a lot of time to learn about both. I've been here so long I've known women who've gone both ways. I don't mean both ways men and women, but I know

about that, too. I mean poisoned or roped.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3, 5:10 p.m.

This tattoo under my left earlobe, the ink of my third ear, I know what everyone says behind my back: “She's got three ears. She must listen extra hard.”

But even if I strain, Gig Harbor out there a few miles away never reaches my ears. I only imagine its waveless water, the foam as it laps the shore. Water, its infinity soaks my soul. When I took regular yard days, one day a week out there, the rich scent of salt and fish in the air sent my spirit into a soar over the walls.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3, 6:30 p.m.

Today some guards from the Records Department came and took a photograph of Toby. It's the last thing they do before the death chamber.

Toby left the rest of us in lock down, but she's so crazy she'll never knew the difference. She finger-painted her airtight strip cell yellow — feces and yellow mustard. When they escorted her off she was covered in her own shit.

Last week she clogged her toilet, flooded her cell again with feces and urine. I mean pure poop mixed with piss and toilet paper. Our whole cellblock turned into a three-inch sewage swamp, flooded her cell first, then it ran out from under her door and right into my #7 across from her and sopped the rest of us. Had my own puke to clean up then.

They turned off Toby's toilet and sink water after the last flood. All

day she pleaded for water to drink. The guards ignored her, the begging, the stench, her filthy cell. Makes me wonder who's on first base around here.

When my day comes, no secrets anymore. Nothing hidden, not at the end. No way to go, all that hush hush in us. The night before, I'll scratch my every secret into the wall behind my bed.

The only up side is Crazy Toby's also Lucky Toby because she's off her rocker and doesn't know how bad it is.

Her one-week mark came and went, the true sign of numbered days as the count show up outside our cells before The Date. A blue plastic-covered logbook shows up in the metal bin attached out there.

Every fifteen minutes the floor guard clomps down our cellblock, stops to peer into Toby's cell, then logs in the blue book to report whatever she's up to... asleep, in a frantic pace, her feces finger smeared, the CO logs it all.

All they want, and I got no proof except my certainty, they want to make sure we're still alive so we won't get there first, off ourselves before they kill us.

I peek out my slot. "Love you, Toby!" She whips her face towards me, smiles, as they march her past my cell, chained and shackled, naked and alone. They hadn't showered her in days.

What a way to go.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3, 8:35 p.m.

Chickadees in full swarm today outside the mess hall as they swoop

and dive to peck in search for breadcrumbs. Clunk against my door. I leave my station at the slot window. An officer's footsteps echo down past me.

Time to pull my food tray I guess, but the notion strikes me. It's late. They already gave us dinner. Is there a new schedule? But why would this change after all these years?

I peek through my door slot. At least the stench from Toby's cell is cleaned up. But no one's out there. No tray, no guard, no one with meds. Nothing. I press my right cheek against my cell door and peer sideways, to the left. Still nothing.

I know the sound, though, the clunk of plastic on metal. It's outside my door this time, the blue notebook tossed in my bin.

I have no proof but got my certainty.

