Shortcomings of the Immediate World

by Jonathan Sapers

Greta had chosen pharmacology over selling beauty creams. She could not explain why. But once she had chosen it, she had known it was the right choice. Looking into her computer, or considering making a phone call to a doctor to extend a prescription, she realized there was a power in what she was doing.

She was the person who was responsible for getting for people the thing that would cure them, that would humor them, that would make them feel better. Sometimes she dreamed of all the little pills, waiting in their bottles to perform their angelic functions: curing, salving, unblocking, repairing.

The bottles were perfectly organized. So many identical fine little white, pink, green, blue pills. Her nightmare was that Sandy, in a fit of irritation, might one day pull down a shelf, the containers would pop open and the pills would all have to be thrown out, because it was impossible to tell them apart outside of their containers. She also worried that Sandy might one day go to the manager and badmouth her. He was just peculiar enough to listen.

“They always take advantage of you,” Sandy said, under her breath, as she stared out over the divider at the milling customers. She was in Greta's space. Why? There was no reason. Sandy touched the pillar. “This counter here is the only thing between us and them. The only thing. You trust them like your family. But they are not your family. Family says hello to you on the street. Do they?”

An image passed through her mind: Mr. Princeton running across the street that very morning with his wife. It had been impossible to ignore how happy they were. Mr. Princeton's gaze fell briefly on her as she passed him; but she was too quick. She looked away before his eyes could catch hers. She knew better than to meet his eyes, than to cause trouble. And yet they had crossed the street at just the

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same time, and he had noticed her and this must mean something. Perhaps they were not so secretly similar. This did not have to mean a great deal. But it could mean something.

Probably not. And Sandy was right. None of these people fighting for her attention would care so much about her outside the store. This was understandable. To them, she was the human face of a large and impersonal corporation that happened to have chosen their neighborhood corner based on statistics about prescriptions and drug company scrips. Indeed, the numbers were apparently good enough that another such corporation was in the process of placing a competing drug store across the street. She understood this maneuver was about money, but at the same time couldn't help wondering if the other corporation had concluded she was low on humanity. That old Mr. Apple really needed someone willing to talk to him or that Mr. Princeton deserved a pharmacist flirt.

“You should probably go out there now, don't you think?” she said to Sandy, softly and with patience. Sandy went, though without any particular enthusiasm. To Sandy it was just a job. Greta understood. She felt that way some of the time too. But not all of the time. Some of the time, behind her column, she thought that her job was pretty important indeed. In another culture she would be treated with respect, perhaps even reverence. She smiled to herself at this. She thought she could very well imagine being a witch doctor, or a shaman.

But on other days, she questioned this. Perhaps the role she played was not important at all and could be filled without a beat by any replacement. She was just a woman in a white coat with a surly clerk. On these days, not such good days, not very good days at all, she imagined herself working in some other part of the store. As fat Mr. Smith, the supposed security man. Or as Stacey, who worked at the front checkout, passing merchandise past the electronic eye with an elaborate slowness, as if she resented the loss of each and every purchased item. The worst, of course, was Mr. Popkin himself. There was something very odd about Mr. Popkin. She did not like the way he looked at her. She did not trust him alone and never ever used

the employee facilities as a result, which anyway, were not particularly sanitary.

And what would make her feel better? It might be a man. It was really such a simple prescription, she knew. But that was what it was. She wondered if she was too obviously jealous of Mrs. Seligson, when she came in with her baby. Or if her inability to deal with Mr. Princeton with the appropriate dispatch had to do with the fact that she regularly pictured him in ways that might make even Sandy blush.

It would happen that she was asked to his house, to deliver medication that he had forgotten to pick up. The house would be a complete mess, tables overturned, food left out. Mrs. Princeton would not be there. She'd be out of the picture before Greta came into it. Perhaps the house was in such an uproar because of her departure.

Anyway, they would fall in love. He would know it and she would know it. And they would regularly meet for lunch every day in his apartment, even though his wife was gone, had never been there in the first place. The pretense —there should be more pretense. They would never eat when they were together and they would rarely speak. She would rub his shoulder with an ointment that took the pain out of it. She rubbed carefully, as firmly as she could manage, though she was not particularly strong. She concentrated on hiding her ulterior feelings and somehow, this was not hard, or anyway, it was not a problem. When she came in the door, he would look up once and smile sheepishly and remove his shirt. She thought the ointment smelled like some kind of spice. Reflected in his eyes, she seemed to have a kind of halo. When she went to the kitchen to wipe her hands, it was as if she were floating.

The closest she had come to her fantasy in real life was fending off a request from Mr. Popkin for a private massage. Mr. Popkin suffered from an indeterminate discomfort in his lower back. It was an ailment she believed he had invented, but, since he was her boss,

she felt obliged to discuss it with him. She suggested various pills and light exercises to which the supposed ailment responded so well that he appeared at the counter one morning beaming and took her hands and tried to kiss her fingertips.

“Your hands are warm, they must have healing powers in them,” he said. She pulled away. “You must be a genius at massage.”

“No,” she said.

“Come, you must try it. I will teach you. You must not let the healing properties in your hands go to waste.”

It had been embarrassing. He asked to see her on the weekends, but she wouldn't. No, not even for his health. She did not believe what he said about her hands. It was the kind of sweet talk Sandy was always warning her about — resisting it in his case was easy.

But when she got home, she looked at her hands. She thought that in her dream, when she placed her hands on Mr. Princeton's shoulders, they had felt warmer than usual. She touched her forehead and her knee. She touched her stomach. Everywhere she touched, she felt warmer. She still had it. Her hands were endowed with — what? Her mother had told her that her hands had been so comforting that as a child their roles had been reversed — she had found comfort holding Greta's hand. At night her mother had always asked her to rub her back.

She looked at herself in the mirror. She was comparatively short and thin. She gently stroked her face with her fingers spread wide. As her thumbs crossed under her chin, she felt a slight tickle. She closed her eyes and ran her fingers behind her ears. Her ears tingled and her chin felt warm. She stood up. It was time to make dinner.

On the subway, the next morning, she thought, why not? And she touched her temples again. She felt as if she were sending a warming signal through her brain. She closed her eyes and imagined walking through the entire car touching people's foreheads and curing them of real and imagined pain. Perhaps this man was guilty for not treating his children right, or this one for looking at women other than his wife. Perhaps this woman married

her husband only for money or that one felt her husband was becoming boring in his old age.

She always expected her Mr. Princeton fantasy to end up in Mr. Princeton's bed, but this never happened. Instead, she imagined spending long hours looking out the apartment window. The view was impressive. In four directions. The river was beautiful. Dark to begin with, it combined itself with the horizon, so that it seemed as if there was one slick surface from the foot of the building to New Jersey. North and South, red brick buildings rose like sentries. To the East, she could see the store's side entrance. She imagined looking down on Sandy as she came to work, on Mr. Popkin. Sleeping over and calling in sick so she could watch all day long the drama that was her daily life. She imagined for herself a set of binoculars through which her coworkers were like specimens, twitching on a slide.

Of course, she couldn't ever call in sick. There was no one who could take her place. Majeed and Thomas were really new to the game and though licensed, were prone to overconfidence and mistakes. And who would mitigate the effect of Sandy? And then there were the rules of each HMO, the preferences of each doctor and somehow, in the process, the appeasing of Mr. Popkin without allowing him any liberties. She was indispensable.

Perhaps in some other life, she was a hawk. She would carry Mr. Princeton in her talons to a private nest, away under the eaves of some tall building. She would say to him: look, look here! This is what you're missing!

She did not feel strongly enough in real life to act. She thought he was attractive, but she also thought there was a dullness in his eyes. As if a light had been put out. Nice house, nobody home. How could there be no light with an apartment and a beautiful wife? But she would not ask him this. It was not her place. She would not be helping. It would be hurtful. Doing harm.

In the fantasy's conclusion, she would be looking at that view and feel someone behind her, reaching around, touching her arms, touching her front. Kissing the back of her neck. She did not look at him, only looked forward. Then it would begin to rain. Was it the rain and not him touching her? Maybe it was him at the beginning. But in the end it was always just the rain; light droplets on her back, on her head, on the floor, spattering on the windowsill, hitting the air conditioner, like hundreds and hundreds of pebbles, hard then soft.

It was always Sandy who brought her back from her daydream. Harshly. With a poke in the stomach, or worse with a loud laugh. “Dreamy, you're very dreamy,” she would say, and cackle.

As if daydreaming were some kind of character defect. Greta pitied anyone who did not daydream. There was nothing wrong with it. If nothing else, it made it a great deal easier to accept the shortcomings of one's immediate world. Sandy was always bitter, probably because she could not imagine an alternative to her dumb life. Stupidity thrived on a weak imagination; or maybe it was caused by the inability to imagine a life beyond the one one already knew.

“There's a line at the register, Sandy. You know you're not supposed to keep people waiting.”

“Why's it so bad if they wait? I have to wait for the train. I have to wait in line at the supermarket. They can wait in line for me.” She smiled and looked around the room for a minute as if registering her moment of power. Then she turned and with deliberate slowness, made her way towards the cash register.

“Prescription for Martin.”

Could it be? She had run the prescription, but had been hoping it wasn't Cameron. She tried to keep her eyes on what she was doing. Cameron Martin. It was the same name but she had thought that it was impossible. He always seemed to come in with the same lover. Now he was taking early stage drugs. She did not want to look up. If she did, she would show not only that she knew—

“I don't see nothing here for Martin,” Sandy said, loudly. “What's it for?”

He was about to answer.

“Hi Cameron,” Greta said, looking up, brightly. Please ignore her, please. “I haven't finished them yet, they're right here. Can you give me about ten minutes?”

Cameron looked at his hands.

“Well, she's making it,” Sandy said. “Go ahead and wait over there for me okay? Next? What? I can't hear you.”

Her voice was so sharp!

“Prescription for Cunningham.”

“CunnnnninghAMM. CUnnninGHAMMM….” Sandy waddled slowly back to the bins full of prescriptions. “CUNNInghammmmm.” She rolled the syllables around on her tongue while she looked languidly through all of the packets in the “K” bin.

“‘C', Sandy,” she hissed under her breath. “‘C.'”

“I know it's ‘C,' Miss Goodie Two Shoes.” Sandy readjusted her gaze as slightly as she could and reached out her fat arms and shuffled through the ‘C' packets. Greta concentrated on making Cameron's medicine. He hadn't realized yet that she remembered him. He looked depressed.

Cameron had been a regular customer a few years before. She remembered him shopping with his partner, buying Listerine, vitamins. He called her Sugar Girl and waved at her as he passed by the cash register. She would smile at him and wave back. Now he was in the early stages of dying, standing in front of the cash register wrestling with Sandy, at the gates of Heaven.

“His partner must have stepped out on him,” Sandy whispered as she passed, with a choked snort. “You remember that man he introduced as his partner. He looked a little fishy.”

Greta was sure the word “fishy” could be heard by everyone in the store. She tightly circumscribed her movements. She was safe behind this pillar, the pillar that kept her from being able to stop Sandy from saying things like this, also kept her from being implicated. She was afraid of Sandy. If Sandy made her more

efficient, helped her serve more patients faster, then perhaps Sandy was her medicine. She hoped not.

She worked as quickly as she could. She wrote and printed out the label. Her job was to provide what she could provide with respect. She would make Cameron's medicine even though — even though what? But she could not even decide who came first. And here was Mr. Apple.

“Greta dear, Greta, How are you? Could you come out a moment?”

Mr. Apple. A disagreement between his prescription and the health care plan his son had switched him to. He would be holding his old policy; his pill bottle.

“Hello, Mr. Apple, what can I do for you?”

“Well, you see….” Greta began waiting for him to finish. She already knew what the issue was. She also knew there was nothing she could do; short of calling his penny-pinching son and getting him to change Mr. Apple back to his old policy. He talked and smiled. Mr. Apple came from a period in time when if you were polite and you smiled, complicated problems such as this one could be easily solved.

“You have to talk to your son, Mr. Apple,” she said, just a shade too loudly. “Your son switched you off of the old policy and on to this one. It doesn't pay for the same number of doses.”

“But how can that be? Don't they trust my doctor? Don't they want me to get better?” He looked at her in a kindly way, as if they both somehow knew that she knew the answer and that if she only applied herself she might find it and save them both a lot of trouble.

“Greta? I can come back,” came Cameron's husky voice. Had it always been so husky? He was calling her name, but seemingly by rote. Sometimes people called her Greta within minutes of coming into the pharmacy area, just because everyone else did. She wished she had insisted on formality.

“No, Cameron. Don't. Just a few minutes.”

There was a pause.

“Greta?” Now, Mr. Princeton. “She forgot to call it in again.”

“Your wife? I can make some up for her. Just a minute,” she said, turning.

“I'll—”

“Please, make a line,” said Sandy. “MAKE A LINE.”

There were now four or five people waiting. Some she knew, some not.

“I don't want to make a line,” Mr. Princeton said. But he stood back from the counter. Mr. Apple stood his ground.

“Go along now, sir, go along now. Can't you see there's a line behind you?”

“There is no need to be rude.”

“Rude? You have no idea what rude is. If I get rude, you'll know it.”

“I am simply trying to get medical attention — Greta?” There was a tremor in Mr. Apple's voice now; uncertainty. “Greta!” he called more loudly.

She felt as if the counter had turned into a moat; separating her from this teeming mass of people needing help. What could she do? Why couldn't she reach across it?

Suddenly Mr. Popkin came around the corner of the aisle. “Sir,” he said to Mr. Apple, in a flat, lifeless voice. “We don't want to cause a disturbance.”

Go, just go.

“Can't anyone help me?” But his voice was quieter now, resigned. He turned to leave.

“Thank you sir,” Mr. Popkin said. “Thank you.”

Mr. Apple looked once more, furtively, at Greta and shuffled off.

Cameron, she noticed, was gone.

It was always Greta who stayed late, never Sandy, even though it was Sandy's job. Greta did not trust Sandy with the cleanup, because she did not trust her alone with the medicines. This made Sandy suspicious. That night was no different.

“You know where the key is?” Sandy said, giving Greta a look.

“Yes, Sandy, I do,” she said. “Now go.”

Sandy waddled away, skeptically. Greta worked quickly. She knew Mr. Popkin paid attention and was very interested in catching her alone. She straightened the bottles of pills: one by one on each shelf from one end of the room to another. For every ailment. For sugar deficiency, for AIDS, for pain, for indigestion.

If she were a drug company, she would make a love potion. A love potion would be part painkiller, part anti-oxidant, part anxiety reducer; it might result in stomach upset, there would have to be something for desire and something for the sharpening of the senses that can occur. Perhaps there would have to be an FDA warning? It would have to work on every one including Sandy and even Mr. Popkin. The thought of their two names together made her laugh out loud. She noticed suddenly that the store was empty.

She could hear the Muzak playing. She wondered if they increased the volume after a certain hour so as to make the absence of customers less obvious. Strangers were in the dark, exchanging passing glances at an alarming volume. She finished quickly, turned out the light in the pharmacy and shut the gate. She put on her coat. Then she froze. She could hear Mr. Popkin talking to Stacey, in the stomach ailments aisle. She ducked down behind her counter and waited.

It seemed like an eternity. She could not hear what they were saying. There was murmuring, giggling. She felt sick to her stomach. Then, suddenly, nothing but the Muzak again. She waited for a minute more then looked up. There was no one between her and the vitamins. She slipped out, skipped an aisle and then stood in Soaps pretending to consider which bath lotion to buy.

“Working late?” Popkin said, in his booming voice.

She turned pink. “Just finishing up some things,” she said. She hoped he would not say, “What things?” She was not very good at lying.

Popkin considered her with an unpleasant smile. “You are a very beautiful woman,” he said, as if he thought he was being generous. She looked at the detergents. Tide, Downy, Arm & Hammer, All, Wisk. “You should be married.”

Words she should not say ran through her head. She looked at his hands, the backs of which were covered in unruly black hair. She could hear his labored breathing. He was overweight. The love potion she made for Sandy would have to induce blindness. “Have you tried some of our weight loss treatments, they could be very good for you. I could suggest some you know.”

He stared at her for a moment and she held her breath. She was aware this could go very badly for her. Perhaps he had come to lecture her about the commotion earlier in the day; perhaps he was expecting increased competition due to the new store. His features seemed to pause midway through forming an expression as he considered her and her remark. Then they pulled back into a wide, unpleasant smile. He laughed.

“You are remarkable,” he said. “You are remarkable. You say that with a straight face. Unafraid. I am unable to be angry. I might do with a little weight loss, mightn't I? Even your voice heals.”

Sweat formed on the back of her neck. Popkin ran his eyes over her as if she were a shipment of paper towels. In what part of the store would she go best? Where would she most quickly catch a customer's eye? In the makeup section? Out by the door with the Halloween candy? She glanced around her nervously.

Down the aisle, a customer was looking through shampoos. She stepped towards him. Popkin smiled unpleasantly. “Oh come now, Greta, you are perfectly safe with me.”

She thought how useful it would be to have a pill to ward off unwanted attentions. An atmospheric spray. A tab. It might double as the antidote to the love potion, except then, what would be the point?

She smiled politely.

“Excuse me, where's the tooth floss?” said the customer. Mr. Princeton! Her heart jumped. Where had he come from? How lucky for her. His timing could not have been better. She grabbed his arm. “Just over here,” she said in a whisper. She propelled him to Dental Care then to the cash register and then out into the street.

“Goodbye Greta!” Popkin called.

Mr. Princeton smiled eagerly at her. Now what had she done?

Behind his head, as if providing an alternative option for his shoulders to support, was the moon, bright white, heavy, overbearing.

“A full moon,” she said. “Look.”

“It's like, it's like….”

He couldn't say what it was like. Why not? Was he an idiot?

“It's like —”

Perhaps he was a stutterer. There were treatments for that.

“You,” he said finally. Then he smiled.

“Like me?”

The sidewalk was empty. She looked up and down. Maybe her Prince Charming

was late or would turn up from another direction.

“Like you, shining above us all, helping. Doing good.”

She looked up at him. He was tall. His skin was good. He looked reasonably trim. The shoulder complaint was most likely the result of too much exercise. Midlife something or other. This was good, not bad. She decided his bill of health was clean. Or was it? “Thank you for rescuing me just now.”

“Is that what I did?”

She would have to explain. She did not want to explain.

All around them, lights were going off in stores. Except for the lights in Greta's drug store, the street was dimming. They began walking downtown together.

The idea came into her head that an opportunity was passing through her hands; or a daydream was being extinguished in the light of real life. Poof! Or maybe — she kept on walking alongside

Mr. Princeton. She was a free woman. A free woman who had just been threatened by her boss. Perhaps she should ask at the new drug store for a job?

“What do you think of the new drug store?” she asked, gesturing.

They looked inside. So far it was just an empty room, a vast space lit by a solitary red “Exit” sign. Where would they put Makeup? Film Developing? The Pharmacy? The space had so many possibilities. But soon, it would be organized in the usual unimaginative labyrinth of white blocks. They would hire another Greta and another Sandy. And Mr. Princeton wouldn't know the difference.

“I think it's….” he looked at her, newly wary. “This is a trick question isn't it?”

“No,” she said. “I think in the morning I shall put in my resume there.”

“Then I'll have to switch pharmacies.”

They walked on in silence. A siren scream cut into the street sounds then dissipated. She realized she was happy. “Yes, I think you will,” she said.

“Well, only if you —”

They were at her subway stop. “Thank you again for saving me.”

“You're welcome.”

The next day, she could barely convince herself that anything so unusual had happened.

Sandy said, “Did you have a date with your boyfriend last night?”

She thought she could almost laugh.