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A Remedy For The Gray
(Excerpt/Sample)

by Karyn L. Stecyk

Sitting on the edge of the couch with the phone in one hand and the flimsy strip of paper teetering between my fingers of the other, I stared at the numbers until the ink bled. Robin was pounding on the bedroom door, shouting for me to let him out.irate curses punctuated by tender, begging inflections. Perhaps today wasn't a good day to make a phone call.

The day had gone decent until my poor judgment on the right time to announce the refill of pills. Flakes of peanuts and

chocolate flew from his mouth as he accused me of trying to poison him, waving one of the bottles in front of him like it was cocaine. He demanded I swallow some first and tried to shove one of the capsules into my mouth. I squirmed away. That was when he picked up the mug from our trip to San Francisco. It was one of a pair, with an image of the Golden Gate Bridge that changed color when filled with hot water. The pieces of ceramic still lay on the floor, a shimmering mosaic beneath the bright overhead lights. My wrist still stung from blocking the projectile.

After barricading myself in the closet, tight and cozy with the broom again and tasting its dust and dirt, we came to an agreement that he should spend some time alone. He had sobbed into my hair, spewing apologetic and regretful verbal diarrhea.

"I know," I had told him. "I know."

In the bedroom, he was calm for a whole twelve minutes before he decided being alone wasn't fair. The door rattled in its frame with each hit.

Some days he was less of a coin spinning on its edge, but they were scarce. And I knew from experience that such occasions were dwindling to extinction. I was already prepared to wake one day to Robin being nothing more than an empty shell. Or come home to find him having bashed his head in against the corner of the

countertop. Or unable to suppress an outburst in public, someone notices and pulls the trigger.

Robin threw his weight against the door. I heard him slide down to the floor. The picture was vivid from the times he'd playfully lock me in the bedroom and block my path by sitting against the door. He'd grin wide and suggestive, cajoling me to attempt to drag him away from it. I'd try, of course. And each time it'd result in him pinning me down and releasing a furor of kisses with his leg nestled between my thighs... I should have sat with him in the room. Maybe things would have pivoted in the other direction.

The paper fell from my fingers and floated like a feather to the floor. It just sat there, so I set the phone down and went to fetch the broom to sweep up the shattered mug before someone got hurt.

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I had been fiddling with my promise ring while I waited in line that morning. No one liked to talk when they didn't have to. The armed sentries watching us like hawks from across the street didn't help. Among us, the wind was the noisiest. It snipped the last leaves from trees, amputated the songs of birds, and stole the voices of mundane conversation.

The man in front of me, wearing a jacket patched with duct tape, shuffled forward. I followed him, and three dozen others

followed me. After hours of stationary spot-holding, it was about time the chain moved forward and at a reasonable pace.

I tucked my hands under my armpits, fingers frozen from being subject to the elements for so long. I thought about how Robin would wrap himself around me, nuzzling my hair, as we waited for entrance to the hole-in-the-wall theatre downtown. We always seemed to get tickets for the coldest day of the month. Guilt clawed from within my chest. I was the lucky one. To be able to stand here in the cold.

The smoke from the wildfires in the west had finally settled in, chased out the comforting sunlight. It blended into buildings and sidewalks, but not into the sentries. They wore black riot gear and full helmets that were painted over after each nick or scratch. Even disorder had to be maintained.

The line inched ahead again, and I counted how many remained before me. Still too many. It was disquieting. I didn't like leaving Robin alone this long. Not hours past pawning my salvage of cables from a quaint IT company recently adopted into Zone 0. He needed me. These few hours seemed to count against the years we had been together. Maybe a Snickers—if there were any in stock—would make it up to him.

"They're not going to run out again, right?" The voice of the teenager behind me was muffled by the white mask covering his mouth and nose.

The girl beside him shot him a nasty look. Her eyes and hair were a dark contrast to her mask.

"Not for us," she said. "Why do ya think we're here so early?"

The boy scoffed, lowered his head. "These lines only get more and more ridiculous. I'm sick of it."

I rolled my eyes at the gripe.

"Ya?" She grabbed the collar of his hoodie. "Maybe if ya guys didn't get Cliff's leg broken, we'd just take turns standing here like usual. If ya don't want to be here, go. Find a dealer instead. Get your nose smashed in again. Be my guest."

I tensed, ready to get out of the way if needed, as the eyes of the sentries fell on them—and by proximity, me. The girl, having sensed their attention as well, released him.

The closest sentry continued to regard them through a tinted visor, one hand poised above the weapon on their belt. Did sentries have to form lines like herded sheep to get their filters, too? Or did they get priority shipping from a surviving branch of EMS?

After musings about another career change, I was ushered into the entryway of the corner store. Plastic shopping baskets were stacked next to the subsequent set of doors that opened to the floor. Two security drones stood by, nodding for someone to enter only when another left. They unnerved me more than the

sentries. I'd heard that Zone 1 monopolized recent AI systems. These were too mechanical, too rigid, archaic.

Two more shifts forward and I finally had the chance to occupy myself by reading the latest layer of the bulletin board. Some of the flyers were printed, but many hand-written and illegible. The papers ranged from pages torn from notebooks to wax paper sandwich wrappers, and were stapled, taped, gummed, glued, or pinned on top of each other:

FILTERS!!! Limited Supply.

PSYCHIC HEALING. Open your mind, free yourself and loved ones.

Homecare wanted. Will pay \$\$\$\$. Serious inquiries only.

Tired of Fear? Tired of Life? Find SALVATION with-

Will work for CASH ANY JOB ANY TIME.

Need a break? Call Kitkat for a great time. Low rates guaranteed.

Entertainment at its finest. I always made a point of finding which paper was the most stripped of contact information. Or which boasted the most amusing grammar. On a good day, I'd tell them to Robin, and for a moment it'd be just us and our laughter. Judging from the browsing eyes, and casual flips or furtive ripping of paper from the others around me, I wasn't alone in finding the board a welcome reprieve.

I spotted a crisp sheet of printer paper peeking out from under someone's prophetic rant about Zone 0 breaking 55th Street

before the month was out. Beneath the top sheet was a posting with a header and logo of some research company: NewGaia Research and Development. The professional formatting threw me for a loop, but after a moment of staring blind at the typeface, I could give it a proper read.

I skimmed over the qualifications a second time. Perspiration beaded in my palms. A search for research participants—for those who couldn't catch PrionK12 even if they, like myself, actually tried.

The text regarded me, as inquisitive as I was of it. Robin wasn't so far gone. Not yet. Maybe whatever those scientists were researching could help him—cure him. I thought of my brother; how in the end, Robin and I could do nothing but watch. A cure? They were overambitious, asinine thoughts.

I turned to an ad selling puppies, probably feral. But PK didn't attack their brains or play house in their microbial clouds. We'd all be better off with just a dog.

But I found myself rereading NewGaia's ad, the prospect of science prevailing tugging at me. Enticing me. I once worked as a lab technician, though now that felt so long ago. Maybe this was the purpose of my immunity. And I could do more than just sell detritus to keep Robin and I afloat while we anticipated the worst.

I pocketed one of the dangling strips of paper. Maybe someday I could hold out my hand without Robin falling through my fingers, our touch no longer a union of oil and water. Besides, the ad promised financial compensation. Couldn't argue that.

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