

Sick

by R. S. Croft

It's February and it's raining. Icy, hard rain stings my face as I walk to the drugstore. I'm hot and cold with a fever, my head is throbbing. Shoppers Drug Mart is open until midnight; it's eleven thirty. I hit the button beside the door with my fist and the door hums as it opens. The light from the overhead florescent strips stings my eyes. I grab a red plastic shopping basket from a stack and make my way to the aisle marked pain relief. I pass a couple of teenage girls at the makeup counter. They try on eye shadow and lipstick; one of them does a double take as I pass. I know I look sick. I'm five foot eight and I weigh 92 pounds.

I pick up two boxes of extra strength lemon Neo Citran, a large bottle of cough syrup, and a family size bag of cherry Halls cough drops. I stop by the pharmacist's counter and ask for 2 large bottles of acetaminophen with codeine. She looks into the basket and then up at me. She doesn't say anything but I know she wants to. I pull the basket off the counter and walk down to the end aisle. I find tissues, and put three boxes in my basket. I pick up a box of cherry pop tarts from the same aisle.

The basket feels like a dead weight as I heave it onto the checkout counter. It slams down. I feel sweat beading on my forehead.

"Got the flu eh?" asks the guy at the cash register. His nametag reads Phil.

"Uh huh," I mutter.

"Time of year – everybody's sick." Phil says swipes the cough drops over the scanner.

"Uh huh."

I am getting sharp pains in my stomach and I want to cry just listening to the guy in the red smock behind the counter. He is making me angry and sad and frustrated. He bags my stuff and I hand him the last of my money. Money I was going to spend getting high. Outside the store the freezing rain feels good on my face. I slump against a concrete pole. I live four blocks away. I start to shiver again as I start walking.

My roommates and I live on the second floor of a house. I am standing halfway up the front stairs. I need a rest so I sit.

"Is that you?" Suzette yells from the kitchen.

"Yes – it's me," I yell back.

Pulling myself up by the handrail, I finish climbing the stairs.

"Can you put the kettle on, Suzette?"

"Tea or cocktail?"

"Cocktail."

Suzette and I are attuned to each other's various addictions. I knew her daily liquor run schedule and she knew what I needed when I was dope sick. In my room I leave my clothes in a wet pile on the floor and change into a torn sweatshirt and a pair of long johns. On my way to the kitchen I pick up a hair elastic from the bathroom sink. Suzette sits at the table in a fluffy hotel bathrobe, vodka tonic in one hand, a Marlboro light in the other.

“Do me a favor – my hands are shaking.” I hand her the elastic and a piece of paper towel. Suzette knows how to make a sieve over a glass with the paper towel and elastic. She has seen me do it daily for the past 6 months. I shake out a dozen acetaminophen onto the kitchen table from the white plastic bottle. We crush the pills together with the bottoms of rock glasses. With the cigarette package, Suzette scoops the white powder onto the paper towel sieve. The hair elastic holds the paper towel in place at the top of the glass. I watch her pour hot water over the powder.

“Ok stop – that’s enough,” I tell her. The glass is a third full of hot cloudy water.

“Do you want the Neo Citron chaser?” she asks as she takes another drag of her Marlboro.

“Mmmm,” I reply as I sip the hot bitter mixture.

I’m going to feel better in a minute. I wait.

“You look like shit.”

“I know,” I reply, and we both laugh.

“When do you go in?”

“Wednesday,” I tell her. “Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday....” I mouthe as I count on my fingers. “They want me to be clean for at least five days. They do a blood test when you get there and if I’m not clean they’ll send me back.’

“That would suck,” Suzette says.

“I don’t want to go all the way down to Buffalo to get turned back.”

My cocktail was kicking in. The pains in my stomach had stopped and my headache was gone for the time being. I was still sweating.

“I’m going to unplug the phone, I’ll see you tomorrow. Night.”

“I’ll check on you,” she says.

“Thanks Suzette.”

I close the door of my room get in bed and pull the covers around me. I start to shake again. Five days.