

Stephanie Dickinson

Seizures and Shackles in the Medical Unit.

Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, Clinton, New Jersey

Heading deeper into the past, the dream highway takes Krystal and Lucy into childhood towns fattened by hardwoods and salt-flecked sea oats. A sleep-wind blowing erases the present and catapults them back to their beginnings. Krystal calls out for a teammate, an eighth-grader the same as she, a tall blonde with a silky ponytail, who dribbles the basketball down the court, inhaling the odor of shellacked wood floors. She looks like she belongs in this upscale suburban landscape. A silver cloud butterfly. When Krystal dribbles the basketball, she is part of the movement of ball and girl, making the jump shot, concentrating, letting go, arms and legs seeming to know, again hook shot, ball swishing through the net. So far away from herself, yet truly herself. She has pleased herself and the coach. “Stick with it and you’ll go to the Olympics,” he says. This time she isn’t going to bet against herself, isn’t going to cut, bleach, coarsen herself into spiky points of platinum starlight, not real stars, not even real light.

The lights are so bright as they burst from the ceiling. “Hey, Lucy, wake up,” Krystal calls out. She knows her bunkie has had a rough night. “Welcome to Tuesday.” The grim present.

Lucy brushes away the ceiling light. She’s at cheerleading practice, throwing her pompoms in the air and following that with a cartwheel. Upside down or standing on her head, everything makes sense. No one catches the streamers like she does, or flings themselves into a cheer. After she showers, she runs out of the high school to the parking lot, where her older boyfriend idles his Firebird. He’s been waiting, and after she hops in, he pulls a strand of wet hair that’s caught in the corner of her mouth. They’re on their way to his place, where he’s made a surprise for her. A man’s bathroom with stringy wet towels hanging from towel racks and crusty wash rags. Two long-stemmed roses float on the water. The three candles pitch their flames into her breasts and buttocks, like the prongs of Neptune’s fork. Lucy and her Firebird man sink into the tub, the cool water soft with bath oil. He has created a world where even the angels have sex, eat spinach tortellini, and take ecstasy with two lines of cocaine. This time she’ll stick with cheerleading; this time she’ll stay away from the raves.

“Lucy, wake up,” Krystal says, cupping her hands to Lucy’s ear and whispering. Noise that never truly doused itself is ramping up, inmates are shouting to friends to *get the fuck up*, fights erupt over who gets first dibs on the sink and, more important, the toilets. It’s weird that in the midst of a high-decimal noise-fest, you can hear a whisper the loudest.

“What? What?” Lucy cries out, sitting up. “What’s going on?” Her thick dark hair has come out of its barrette and Krystal smooths it off her friend’s forehead.

“Is it still there?” Krystal asks. “The lump?”

Yesterday, the lump arrived. Lucy was soaping under her arm in the shower when she found it. The shock of the *thing*, the *it*. What wasn't there before now is, like a bird's egg or an avocado's seed, planted, incubating. All night in her bunk, her headphones on, the lump drew her fingers to it, testing and teasing her. *Will it be gone tomorrow? Will it be smaller? Who could stop touching such a thing?* It meant nothing life-threatening. A blocked pore, a cyst; besides, a lump rarely meant cancer. She'd fallen asleep.

Before Lucy opens her eyes, she dares her hand to explore her underarm. Perhaps the lump will be gone. But her fingers find it. If it is serious, God help her. The Medical Unit practices neglect that can't be considered benign.

“Is the lump still there?” Krystal asks again. When Lucy nods, she wants to touch it. Okay. Lucy lifts her arm and guides Krystal's fingers to the lump. A hillock. Yes, Krystal feels it like a ball of cookie dough, and when she presses her thumb against the dough-like thing, it moves, then pushes back. “We have to put in a Medical Request,” Krystal says. “I'm worried.”

Lucy agrees, but only if Krystal puts in one too for her episodes. “They won't believe me. They'll think it's all in my head. Take a shower, Lucy. Warm water will help.”

Today the shower is cold, the water burbles, raises goosebumps, then switches to hot—someone has started the water on fire. The angry water is scalding her, burning her. Prison. The water droplets hitting Lucy's skin are massive yellow stones. Lumps. *It's hurting me. Water droplets, how large you are.*

The afternoon of the lump, the two women sit at the table in the common area off the Yard. They're munching on no-name Commissary-brand Doritos and filling out the Health Services Request Form. Lucy traces her pen over the lengthy numbered points elaborating the charges to the inmate for medical services. “The meat of this shitty sandwich is all about how much the inmate has to eat of the bill.”

For free-world citizens the monies mentioned are absurdly small, but for prisoners surviving on a monthly budget of \$30, the threat of having their account charged a medical visit fee discourages them from seeking treatment. You'd think the Infirmary might be cleaner, that the smudged glass would be wiped of fingerprints, that you might not smell the mouths of others. Like homelessness and socks worn for three weeks.

“This form is idiotic,” Krystal says, sinking a tortilla chip in a hot red-salsa pond. “There's two stupid skinny lines to explain the reason for the request. “What am I supposed to say? Episodes?”

They laugh and talk about the get-highs in their shared past.

Krystal and I had a dark time when we each indulged in drugs. Krystal stopped a little later than me but she did stop.”

—Lucy Weems, Inmate #922870C

The “get-highs” in Maximum Compound flow from the Medical Unit in the form of prescription drugs. Inmates research what medication produces a high or a sleepy effect, at what dosages, and what the meds are used to treat so they can present themselves to the Medical Unit with the appropriate symptoms. Which drugs make you feel like praying in a stone, which make you disappear into the beautiful ditch of your own mouth, which pills turn the walls soft, which bathe you in the sex of a tangerine. Neurontin, Catapres, Wellbutrin, H-80s, anything, anything that allows you to escape the dinginess. Inmates prescribed the dreamboat pills stock up on their meds in order to get the effects, or sell them at \$1 to \$5 a pill. Medication is swallowed in front of an officer and yet inmates manage to cheek them.

Freelancing prescriptions turns into a Russian roulette with side effects, drug interactions, cardiac arrests, addiction, and overdoses. Mornings after, the music turns off and you’re impaled, your throat and gut fill with sticks, and some inmates are carried out on stretchers. Your stricken lips seep dry heaves, not tango.

Krystal chuckles, in her low-throated way. It makes Lucy happy every time she hears her friend’s deep laughter. “Remember when we split seven Mucinex between us?” Krystal asks. “You said if we’d taken all seven at once, we’d hallucinate.”

“It made us very drunk and crazy. We both threw up and pooped until the sun went down, but it seemed like a good time,” Lucy says, a silly laugh tittering through her.

“I have such a good time with you, Lucy, I sometimes forget where I am. That’s why I call you my life partner.”

“Life partner.” Lucy squeezes Krystal’s hand. “Now back to my damn lump and your episodes, which I think are seizures.”

The night of the lump Lucy can’t sleep and Krystal climbs out of her bunk and pulls down her own sheet. She rolls Lucy on one side and then the other, tucking her feet in, crossing her arms over her chest, swaddling her in a sheet.

“You’re safe, Lucy,” Krystal says, “I won’t let anything happen to you.” Lucy closes her eyes, coasting along. The walls have been painted beige but cracks river through the plaster, thickening and thinning like scar tissue.

“I want to tell you a funny story. My grandma’s new boyfriend was a straight-off-the-boat Italian. A wino who made his own mozzarella and pasta and marinara clam sauce that he claimed tasted of Milan and was an aphrodisiac. He rolled his own cigarettes and started grandma’s sofa on fire not once but three times. I was 11 and I’d never met him until the phone rang and I answered. My grandma was in the kitchen. *Tommy Mommy!* a man said. “What? Who?” I asked. *Tommy Mommy! Tommy Mommy!* He kept repeating until I hung up. Not long after the doorbell rang and I answered. A short, dark-eyed older man stood there *Tommy Mommy!* My grandmother hearing his voice came running to introduce us. He was trying to say in his broken English “Hi, this is Tommy, is Mami home?” The wine he could drink, he drank rivers of it, knew the vintages and the corks, and he soon knew the police who would constantly bring him home for public drunkenness. He

wore trouser creases sharp as playing cards and was a well-groomed flamboyant drunk. We all adored him. I love my family, the bikers and bookies and accountants.”

“I like your stories. I wish I had some like that,” Krystal says, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

“Krystal, you were a star on the basketball court. A jock of all things.”

“A basketball doesn’t love you.”

To witness Krystal undergoing an episode frightens those around her. Her episodes have even spooked Lucy. Krystal’s eyes widen and the pupils swallow the irises. “Where is the bathroom?” she asks in a little girl’s voice. Is this amnesia or a seizure? The leftover voice belongs to a blond waif wearing a white dress. After years in Maximum Compound, Lucy knows her friend could find all its bathrooms with a blindfold on, but the child of long ago is lost. After Lucy leads her into the bathroom, Krystal turns to her and whimpers, “Do you love me, Mommy?” Lucy answers, “Yes.” Where has Krystal gone? An apartment of soiled carpets where sounds travel through flimsy Sheetrock walls. An apartment where the mother’s hardly there and the bathroom’s the only safe place. Where there’s mold and drip and three hungry girls share a bed. Into the same nowhere she emerged from, the little girl returns. Krystal blinks. She’s breathing regularly. Her eyes fly across the ceiling. “How did I get in here?” Sometimes she blacks out and tries to clutch others; she calls the walls by her sister’s name and stumbles. When she’s herself once more, she’s confused, she’s peed on herself. She’s safe.

O odors accompany the episodes. She keeps going back and again she smells burning leaves. Whiskey aftershave. Her uncle comes in the night. Incest can live its whole life in damp knots and in the tangling brush of a bed shared by three sisters. Alongside the creek of her Connecticut childhood, the molestation flows. It lodges in her like a foul-smelling tavern of swarthy stone and timbers thick as an uncle’s arm. When the smells come to Krystal, she enters the jagged dark of her uncle’s touching. A rock, a place of cold, her uncle’s cigarette dropping its icy ash, flakes of snow, large five-pointed stars burning out in her flesh.

The lump is growing, becoming tender. Soon Lucy knows it’s something. She fills out the Medical Request Form and asks the officers to take her to the Medical Unit as soon as possible, not three weeks hence. They ignore her, tell her to fill out the form that she’s already submitted. Baring her underarm, she shows them the lump. No response. They’re bored. The growth invades her sleep, absorbing her psyche. Nights of strange fish somersaulting, killifish mutating in toxic water. Asleep, it’s her first day and she’s clutching her bedroll and parading naked into Reception. The way some of the inmate women gaze at her makes the breath catch in her throat. Lucy marches one molecule at a time. The piranhas circle.

Another week goes by and she still hasn't been seen. Lucy funnels her Medical Request up the officer hierarchy and shows off her lump to lieutenants and sergeants. *Whoa, we don't need to see that.* Her father calls EMCF and demands medical attention for his daughter. It goes on and on, the show-and-tell, the officers ignoring her. At last, sick of hearing the grumblings, they escort Lucy to the Medical Unit. The nurse examines her and then the doctor passes judgment. She'll need an MRI and a biopsy at St. Francis Hospital. Lucy's scheduled for tests, although inmates are never told when their appointments will be, in the event they're planning an escape. Like praying for a glacier, the seduction of death.

If you leave EMCF for the hospital or any doctor's appointment, even if you are lacking a heartbeat you will be shackled and handcuffed.

—Lucy Weems, Inmate #922870C

Lucy rides in the doggie wagon, head bowed, the 52-minute ride from Clinton to Trenton through the hardwood stands of hackberry and honey locust, the picture-perfect landscape, which she can hardly see. Trenton rises. New Jersey's colorless capital, a church steeple, the interstate's exhaust grime. Government buildings, squat courthouses, traffic floating by. St. Francis Hospital. Prisoners are walked in the front door. The officer accompanying them orders them not to look at the bystanders. "Keep your eyes straight ahead. Stop." Every head in the lobby turns as Lucy shuffles into the waiting room in shackles and handcuffs. A mother pulls her daughter out of Lucy's path and actually covers her child's eyes with her hands. *What am I?* People staring as if the sight of her soils them. *Does my skin glisten and smell goaty?* Shame sinking her into the earth. The lump is biopsied. Cancer. More waiting. The surgery will be performed at another hospital.

This time the doggie wagon pulls up to the front entrance of Robert Wood Johnson Medical Center in New Brunswick. Shuffling in her shackles and handcuffs down the beige halls, she smiles at the red carpet welcome mat. *Welcome*, what a beautiful word. It glows. This hospital is more relaxed than St. Francis, and it's likely that some of the staff have friends or relatives in prison. She's treated as if she's human. Pre-op, they don't mention the shackle on one ankle. The cancerous cells are cut out and a hysterectomy performed on the 37-year-old. Post-surgery, she lies on clean sheets, and for a beautiful week she sleeps as long as she wants to. When she turns over for injections, she remembers her love affair with heroin, and wonders if the allure will always be there. One weekend night in Newark, when business was slow and police sirens kept scaring her dates away, she bought a supply of heroin and rented a hotel room. Her lighter cooked the spoon and her mouth went wet as the powder liquefied. *Tie off, tap, eject the air.* She balled her fist, drew out a thread of blood. The sink, the towel rack softened. In the mirror she appeared to be smiling—mocha cream in the mind. Heroin like cold cancer ate through her uterus and traveled to her brain.

Upon her return "home" she's given her bedroll to carry across the compound. The Medical Unit refuses her request for a pain killer—not even a Motrin. Still hurting, Lucy returns to the Yard, where inmates congregate. She meets Krystal, who has been worried about her best friend. The hysterectomy is only a week and a day old and no one in Medical warns her about her bladder dropping and urine leakage. Lucy sits among 30 other women in their beige uniforms and she's afraid to get up because pee is trickling down her thighs. "To hell with the Medical Unit," Krystal says. "I'm going to pee, too. You're not going to be alone." Krystal pees on herself, and the two friends stand up and walk hand in hand inside.

Privatized prisons lead to the maximizing of profits at great human cost. Witness the abysmal salaries given corrections officers and medical personnel, their low status and lack of respect from superiors. Their own entrapment spills over in their treatment of inmates, who are used for medical tasks they're legally forbidden to perform. New Jersey ranks low in the quality of their prenatal care to pregnant inmates. The State requires pregnant mothers to be shackled during delivery. Lucy witnesses a pregnant inmate bleeding profusely. The officers and Medical Unit staff ignore her and she goes on bleeding for four days.

No one is giving me any answers on why all of a sudden I started to get seizures. I wouldn't be surprised if it's all the black mold and asbestos I breathe in all the time. These buildings are so old and so moldy. The Medical Department here is horrible.

--Krystal Riordan, Inmate #661387

The Medical Unit finally agrees to an MRI for Krystal and this time the doggie wagon transports a shackled and handcuffed Krystal to St. Francis Hospital where her brain undergoes testing. A diagnosis, albeit a tentative one, is given. She's experiencing seizures but why remains a mystery. Epilepsy? Brain abnormality? A tumor? More tests are required to discover the underlying condition. One of the doctors tells Krystal that her symptoms suggest a very uncommon seizure that only happens in women. Rhett Syndrome, which manifests itself in childhood with loss of muscle tone and diminished crawling and walking. This in a girl, an all-star basketball player, seems wildly off the mark.

The ceiling has partially collapsed in the unit where Krystal now works. When it rains or snows inmates run for garbage cans and buckets to catch the water. Krystal wonders if the outside world cares why so many inmate women, some of them good friends, served their time and died soon after being released of cancer or another malady. She continues to experience seizures. The promised electroencephalogram that records brain waves via electrodes pasted onto her scalp has yet to happen. The *soon* has never been performed.