

## Unseen Ailments: Signs, Symptoms and Treatments - Siyarah, Year 11, NSW

Unlike the others, I have always been invisible.

I've never seen the condition present the way it did for me. We stick out dreadfully in a crowd, some more than others. A ring or a watch hanging in mid air, the cuff of a man's trouser leg riding up to reveal empty space doesn't cause much disruption. It's the others, the ones for whom their so called 'invisibility' only enhances how they are looked at in public, how much they're avoided and how many questions they get. They are the subject of my work. They are who I look to cure.

I refuse to believe that we are a lost cause.

I begin my day looking into the mirror, through myself at the space behind me. It serves as a daily reminder that despite my attempts to be present, the fact remains that I am not actually here. My nightgown is suspended in the air, as if hung by a discrete wire frame.

However numb I am to the sight, it still brings me some form of anguish. Perhaps it would be more normal if I was only partially afflicted, if I were one of those people who look as though they were drawn on a piece of glass with diluted paint or those who have irregularities that are so easy to hide they may as well not have occurred at all.

My plain black gloves are my favourite piece of clothing. I slip them over my hands last of all as I get dressed. They cement my actions as tangible and real. It's the final section of emptiness I cover up to complete the illusion that I have an appearance. It is easiest to let others believe that I am a particularly heartbroken widow by wearing floor-length black dresses and a veil. The gratuitous rumours sparked by this are not lost on me. Curiously, my image is known by all the townsfolk, despite the fact that I don't have one at all. I have never even known the colour of my eyes. This brings me enough grief that I may as well be a widow.

On my way to the library I count twenty people who are afflicted. The worst is a woman whose face is cleaved off at a diagonal, like half of her head melted away revealing the gruesome squirming inner function of her throat naked and exposed. The movement of her left eye in half its socket is starkly apparent, twitching in ways most would never see. The cross-section of her brain faces the heavens like a grotesque, lopsided bowl. People look at her wishing she'd worn a hat, disgust as visible on their faces as the woman's tongue even when she didn't speak.

When I get home, it's raining like a broken divine promise and I narrowly manage to get inside before my library books risk getting soaked. I try not to trip on the papers that have fallen from being tacked on the wall of my main room, countless notes on the repulsing affliction that I have dedicated my life to arrayed on a wall. Hundreds of variations and types, but none like mine.

I light a fire and set out my capelet to dry, then curl up on my bay window to look through my finds from the library. Steadily, my window fogs up with warmth and the condensation dampens my shoulder. I put down my book and inspect the rain beating at the window. The field outside is saturated with water, patches of clover leaf being pummelled into the dirt and... oh. Not uninhabited, it seems.

There is a woman, lying in the grass just in her nightgown as normally as one would on a summer's day. She's just close enough that I can see her wide smile, spitting raucous laughter up to the heavens, cackling with every roll of thunder. I can almost hear it through the glass and across the distance. She's bright, noticeable. My heart clenches. I do hate to be a voyeur, it always felt hypocritical that I should watch others when no one has the privilege of seeing me.

Before I have the time to think, I'm outside, holding an umbrella over her face. The rain thrums in a great wall of sound. It takes her a moment to realise that it's not raining on her face and stop laughing.

I stifle a gasp when I see her face; it's really not polite of me. The skin, flesh and sinew of her right jaw is completely absent, revealing her teeth, forever smiling. On her face, arms and ankles are patches of red and pink, where I assume her skin is afflicted. If I blur my vision, I would think they were peony petals pressed against her dark skin.

Then, the remaining half of her mouth smiles at me, and says, "Holy hell, that you, widow Marnie?"

My face relaxes, awkward.

"The very same."

I realise a bit too late that I don't have my veil on and that she can see me, or more accurately, can't. Her smile doesn't falter and my heart skips.

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Later, we're inside and she's warming near my fire. She's giggling to herself faintly and I think if I weren't so deprived of social contact, that laugh would be infectious. I watch the rise and fall of her back as she breathes, lithe limbs to her chest, swaddled in a blanket. I bring myself to sit next to her. The fire is slightly too warm for comfort but I hate the feeling of watching her from afar.

"You didn't have to rescue me, Marnie. Was out there for a reason," she says. I'm sitting on her right so I can only see the eerie smile of her teeth beneath her flesh. If I was forever stuck to her right side, I'd never know if she was upset.

“Auguste. You could become ill. Who else would sell me my apples?” I say.

Maybe that sounded slightly pragmatic. She was an apple vendor, yes, but she was also the only person to dare speak more than a few words to me. I rarely replied, terrified of leading her on.

Despite the fact that I don't have eyes for her to meet under my veil, it always felt as if she was peeking intimately into my soul.

“M'already ill,” she counters, passing a hand over a window into her dermis on her calf. “Saw your notes. You think you can cure this?”

Any other person would nod. It would feel less incriminating.

“Yes,” I tell her, because I don't just think it. I believe.

A shiver runs through Auguste. “Believe me, Marn. You're not the first. What I don't understand is-” she shifts closer to me and I see the bright reflection of fire in her eyes, a miniature lantern encased in glass, “-the whole deal you're putting on fixing.”

“What?”

“Fixing. Why're you trying to fix what isn't broken?”

I feel myself get defensive, a familiar beast fueled by pride being roused in my chest as I begin to formulate an argument in my head. How dare she say that the reason I've put a stopper on my life doesn't need fixing?

Despite not being able to see me, she senses my bristling and elaborates.

“Marn, I know you're doing this for yourself and I don't wanna take from that, but the rest of us? The ailment isn't what makes life so difficult. There's no pain, nothing. What makes it difficult is the people. There's nothing wrong with us. We just look a little different, s'all. Maybe it's easy for me to say, it's not the same for me as it is for you. But my ailment's caused me no pain other than Sister Marta shooing me saying I look like half a death's head when all I wanted was shade. And just between you and me? That sounds like her problem. You don't have to tell me anything now, just think on it. Alright?”

I sigh. “I will, Auguste.”

I watch her eyes look at my lap approximating... something. Then, I feel fingers interlocking with my own. If I were a weaker woman, I'd have cried. Instead, my breath hitches and Auguste hears this because she says, “That okay?”

“More than.”

She laughs that deep, melodious laugh that spirals into smaller, less mature ones. It seems so incongruent with her previous actions.

“Sorry, it’s just that- here I was thinking I’d fallen madly in love with the widow so deep in mourning that she wore black for years without fault. I was ready to die of shame.”

Her honesty shouldn’t surprise me. She’s never spoken an untruthful word. I put a hand on her marred cheek and bring her in close, just enough that she can feel my breath on her lips.

Auguste kisses me then, and she’s not kissing a ghost but someone who is definitely and entirely here.