

Rattles and clangs of metal against metal reverberate through the corridor and into my cell, the pulses of noise ebbing into my bones. The wardens clatter their batons against the ribs of my enclosure; they're prowling every darkened crevice. One particularly vindictive looking officer presses themselves against the bars, observing me. Even from this segregatory distance, their heavy brow and accusatory eyes burrow into me. Their gaze is somewhat shielded by box-rimmed glasses, it distorts their eyes from where I'm sitting, so it's as if dozens of them are swimming around in those glass squares on their face, each one bobbing around so I cannot see which are real and which are not.

The walls of my cell constrict me with a steely embrace, I have huddled myself into the farthest corner. Here, I await obliteration. If there was a less jarring term available I would use it, but the complete and utter destruction of my being is truly what's about to happen.

Tomorrow morning, my brains shall be dashed out - my memories erased.

Some people, I'm sure, would jump at the opportunity of a clean slate.

The idea of feeling pristine and devoid of trauma sounds like a relief.

They only remove negative memories, anything ranging from an

awkward interaction or a difficult breakup to all-consuming political rage; anything dissatisfying to you will be ushered out of your mind. The idea seems genuine enough at first. Trouble is, they don't just wipe your memories, they replace them. The complexity of life is forcibly removed and replaced with insipid pabulum. You don't even get a choice. There are those who gobble down delusions, who are satiated with the imaginary. Not me. The world of fiction and fancies is a delightful creation, so utterly human; but that escapism has been turned into a cleansing, a correction, a removal of spirit. The fire that burns, the storm that blusters in the bowels of the frustrated, the oppressed and the maddened is zealously purged by this group that likes to keep them docile.

After all, nobody can possibly be unhappy with their lives if they can't remember what was wrong with it. Who on earth could complain if all they remember about themselves is bliss? Those that undergo this ritual must genuinely believe it's for their own good, little do they know that by the end of it, they're a shell of their previous selves.

They deserve to know the truth, about themselves and about the institution they support - not some watered-down fairy story. I wrestled

hard for that right - I spent years avoiding suspicion. I tried to spend that time building evidence against them - now I shall pay the price. Even though I'm aching, my nerves are fried and my back stings with the steely cold of these walls and the tension in my head is pounding, I smile. I remember what I did. All those times that I supposedly went through with the procedure and they believed me.

Last time they brought me here, instead of flinging me into a cell, I was hustled down a corridor by some heavy handed nurses. Everyone arrives here at some point in their lives, this was my sixth or seventh time. Heaven only knows how many memories had been robbed from me by then. Two of them hooked their grip under my armpits as we followed two more down the walkway in a sickening procession of dingy lab coats and conspiratorial expressions. Looking back, their malice was oh so thinly veiled. Another cluster of bodies passed us by, our mirror image; except the person they were carrying wore a blissfully unaware expression. They were headed back down the corridor from the room that shall soon be my destination. No amount of correction could shatter the memory of her placated face, the mindless hum that waned from her throat much like the shrill noise of machinery. The walkway was lined with mottled metal bars attempting to conceal more and more people like

that bleary, dazed woman. Each sheath of bars had a lock, and I wondered who they were protecting with that restraint in place.

The weary grey that coated every surface in that corridor suddenly dropped away. A plain, standoffish white door abruptly announced the end of that liminal walkway.

One of the nurses pressed his hand to the small of my back, his spindly fingers digging into my spine as he ushered me through that door and into the room. More and more of them swarmed me, pressing me into a rigid seat with the same pallid colour as their jackets. They buckled and fastened and wrenched reems of plates and wires to me and a visor was lowered over my eyes and I was catapulted into darkness. Indiscernible hands crawled all over me as they finished setting up the mechanism. “You won’t feel a thing,” a voice stated from the inky ether. I wished so much for my sight back. “Are you ready?”

I couldn’t reply, my mouth had contorted into a juddery grimace. A fizzy, whirring sound flitted through the air, buzzing all around, before an almighty whipping sound cut off that buzz and I was swallowed by unconsciousness.

Hannah Eve Cobble

When I woke, blobs of flesh hovered above me. The blariness ebbed away and I was able to see their faces again. A softness masked their harsh features. The man with the contorted, horrid fingers tapped my forehead to fully rouse me from that blackened state.

“Miss Mila Barret, are you awake?”

Recognising my name jolted me to awareness. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Do not panic. You’ve just woken from a harmless procedure. How are you feeling?”

I tried to recollect the events prior to this, and that’s when it hit me: I remembered everything. I knew the reason I was there, I knew where I was, I knew the nonsense that they were trying to spoon-feed me, and I knew it was wrong. My jaw clenched, determined to not let my secret spill out. This was the first time that I had escaped. My mind had - against all odds - remained firmly intact. How was this possible?

Thoughts charged through me ; perhaps sheer coincidence, a freak accident, or was it my own resistance that saved me? The one thing that resonated with clarity was the same thing. I remember, I remember, I remember.

“I feel...odd. Why am I here?”

A need to remain inconspicuous kept a chokehold over my every word, I kept hoping that my acting would suffice. They rotated their heads to look at each other before turning back to me with a satisfied smile.

“That’s nothing you need to be concerned about. Please go home, get plenty of rest, and contact the facility if need be.”

I left that day with complete resolve. Before, like everyone else, I had assumed that their operation was indeed harmless. My memory had been swamped, but then it was finally dusted clean. I decided then to make everyone aware like me.

I stayed under the radar for so many years after that, they stayed utterly unaware of what had happened. The irony never escapes me, and even now, it humours me. I stifle a pitiful laugh, frantic, hot tears burning the back of my throat, demanding to come out. The grip of this wretched room snatches uneven breaths from me. I mustn’t panic, I escaped before, perhaps I’ll do it again. Flaky uncertainty and over optimism isn’t going to save me right now, but I’ll cling to this hope until they pry it from my trembling hands.

I earn a scathing glare from the warden with the furrowed brow. My deception is going to cost me everything soon, I'm not really sure how I'm able to laugh right now, although that laugh truly was pathetic. I'm not sure how, but they found me, eventually. When they threw me in here, who knows how long ago, they bolted the lock behind me. Then I realised what the restraint was for: it was to mock people like me, the frustrated and downtrodden, desperate to break away and ignite change. That taunting little confine stops me from pursuing that.

Rhythmic clanging of a metal baton against the bars jerks me from my doomsday spiel that my mind was brewing. The noise summons me from the cell. Now, it is time to go down that dreadful corridor again. All I can do is hope to recognise myself again once it's over.