

CABIN FEVER

Everybody I know is sick. They're hacking and wheezing. They're standing over the sink with a neti pot, pouring warm, salty water into alternate nostrils. The wastepaper baskets overflow with Kleenex. I've got a chest cold that won't go away. On my kitchen table, in place of food, stand bottles of olive leaf extract, oil of oregano, elderberry syrup, bee propolis, Ricola lozenges, Umcka. I laugh at the *apparatus of illness* in front of me.

Lynn slipped on the ice and fractured a bone in her foot. She's unable to walk, so I drive her to the orthopedist. Her right foot (swollen, blue) is X-rayed, and she is outfitted with an enormous gray plastic boot that looks as if it's designed for exploring the surface of the moon.

Back home, my bathroom counter now looks even worse than the kitchen table: jammed with tins of menthol-camphor lineament and torn boxes of adhesive pain patches. It smells like an acupuncturist's waiting room. I think to myself that if we took all the herbs, supplements, eyedroppers, cans of saline spray, and threw them all out, it would make no difference whatsoever. Lynn is more direct. She says, "I think I'll just hurl myself down the stairs and get it over with." Later, I ask her: "Can I get you anything?" She replies: "How about a small gun?"

Stuck inside, I've been reading Ernesto Sabato's 1948 novella *The Tunnel*, which I first read in Spanish (*El Túnel*) when I was 17. Today I read from an English translation I borrowed from the library: *On a tiny planet that has been racing toward oblivion for millions of years, we are born amid sorrow; we grow, we struggle, we grow ill, we suffer, we make others suffer, we cry out, we die, others die, and new beings are born to begin the senseless comedy all over again.*

Not really what you ought to be reading when you're sick. Some deep part of me has always rebelled against that philosophy anyway — rebelled against writers who revel in hopelessness. To deliberately counter this bleakness, Lynn and I watch episodes of *Schitt's Creek* on Netflix, and I delight in hearing Lynn laugh aloud, her elevated foot on my knee.

I return *The Tunnel* to the library. I love the library, especially around 11 in the morning. I love the boxes of free, discarded books on the floor as you enter: a rebound copy of Herman Wouk's *Youngblood Hawke*, volume seven of Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Part of me wants to take home every book I see. I love the sign on the wall — *?Mysteries??* — as if even the librarians aren't sure what's shelved there. And I love best the small community you reliably see there each morning: the retired financier sitting in a blue upholstered chair reading the business section of *The New York Times*; the tutor and the ESL student working at a long table; a man who may or may not be homeless checking his phone; Michael, from the Boro Art Center, in his long black winter coat, in front of a computer, researching his family history. "Hello, stranger," he says to me. I shake his hand and tell him that someday I intend to write a story about his

antique store (next to the fire station.) “I want to call it *The Antique Store That Should Be in an Antique Store.*”

Lynn has thanked me for my generosity in the face of her fractured foot, and I think now that *generosity* defines this library. If public libraries didn’t exist, and I stood up at some town meeting to suggest building one, I’d be laughed out of the room. “I propose that we buy, let’s say, 20,000 books, and allow people to borrow them for free.”

“And what happens when they don’t return them?”

“We give them a fine?”

“How much?”

“A nickel?”

And yet public libraries *do* exist and thrive —and the shelves aren’t bare where 20,000 books have been stolen. Libraries are a tribute to a noble and antique idea: that most people, if you give them the chance, will behave with decency and generosity. I leave with volume seven of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, and I’m feeling a little better already.