

SHORT STORY

tight air

by Angela Regius



"Meeting" by Dana Schwarz-Haderek

we all contemplated suicide. we all hoped for euthanasia. we did not know what it meant: euthanasia. we never learnt the word. what we did hope for was an ending. something painless, something quick.

I don't remember how it started. just that: getting up and going to sleep. a hundred times. a million times. there was no use in counting; every day was the same. there was no concept of time. the lights turned on and we got up. they turned off and we went to sleep. I barely had a thought in my mind. there were dreams, though.

my dreams were all set in the restricted area we lived in. it's all I'd ever known. I dreamt of the furniture moving, tables and chairs floating in the air. I dreamt that the walls were melting, that they burned my hand. I dreamt that one of the others went into my room and sat on my bed. this never happened in reality. don't enter the room of your peer — it was a rule we all followed.

each one of us had their own room. windowless, same as the shared room. it was the centre of this place, our place, and we spent our days there. or rather the times we were awake. it was basic. a big table, a couch. there was a kitchen unit with a fridge and a fruit basket. both were restocked each morning.. there was no door for entry or exit. all the doors of the shared room led to our individual rooms or the bathroom we shared.

there were twelve of us and we all looked very much alike. not in the way identical twins look alike. twins have differences in their features. small ones, bigger ones. we were the same, though. our faces completely identical, the only variances lay in the ways we moved, in how we walked or pronounced words. not that we talked much. but we could tell each other apart. at least, I could.

it happened in the shared room. I had just gotten an apple from the fruit bowl and was on my way to the table to eat it. I stumbled and fell. I extended my arm to soften the blow. the apple was the first thing to hit the floor. my body twisted. *crack*.

they grouped around me. they watched me stand up. they stared.

I didn't feel the pain right away. only a throbbing sensation. there was something on my shirt, something wet and warm. I looked down. my shirt was red with blood.

a big lump on my face; my nose was broken.

someone had cleaned the small puddle of blood off the floor. everything looked just like before, but something had shifted. they started keeping a distance. one could hear tiny whispers in the room we shared. the changes were minimal. in our world though, they meant

everything. since that day, I was different. an outsider.

not only did my status in the group change. I changed, too.

it was the pain.

up until that point, life had been dull. meaningless. and then the pain came and screamed into my face, screamed into every cell of my body. I couldn't sleep. I kept lying in bed even when everyone else was up. I could hear them through the walls. walking. wondering. but I had found something they didn't. a meaning to this life. feeling something as opposed to nothing. the pain had spread from my face to the rest of my body. one thing was now clear: I was alive. and I could die. time was not endless anymore.

it started with light poking. my fingers picked at the swollen tissue on my cheeks and on the bridge of my nose. each touch hurt. but it was something I could control: the pressure I applied to my wounds. the more I got used to it, the stronger the poking became.

my body had no chance for healing.

they became more and more distant. they acted as if they didn't see me. they stopped talking to me, stopped acknowledging me altogether. acted as if I was not in the same room with them, with an absurdly swollen face. the inflammation had expanded, the skin red and blue. there was a greenish part on my upper lip, a pocket filled with liquid. I took a dinner knife from the kitchen cupboard and opened that area of my skin in front of the bathroom mirror. a yellow substance seeped out. the smell was excruciating. I cleaned the sink, washed the knife and put it back.

the pain, the smell, the scarring of my skin: this didn't stop me. it spurred my interest even further. I wanted to know what else my body could or would do. I started hitting my head against the door frame, face first. after each hit, I needed some time. when the pain died down, I did it again.

eventually, the fever came. I lay in bed, sweating, burning up. I couldn't get up. no one looked after me. my throat was dry, I was dying of thirst. literally: I was lying in bed dying, my body tired from abuse.

I woke up in an unfamiliar place. the room was white, light was shining through a window. people were questioning me. they wanted to know who I was, where I came from. someone had left me on the stairs of a hospital. unconscious, near dead. somebody talked about sepsis, about medication I was treated with. I listened, understanding half or less of what was said. I tried to answer the doctor's questions. she looked at me. she looked and stopped asking.

nothing made sense. I was left in a world I didn't know.

every day, I learnt something new: words, places, images. I couldn't stop staring at the elderly woman in the bed beside mine. I couldn't stop switching between TV channels. I absorbed everything in my reach. day by day, the world became a bit more familiar.

there were no signs of a stroke or drug abuse. a mental illness was assumed. when it was time for me to leave, I was transferred to an assisted living facility.

maybe I am mentally ill. who wouldn't be?

I didn't stay there for long. just long enough that I could make sense of the world and convince others of the same. today, I live on my own. I have a small apartment and do odd jobs — cleaning or working in warehouses.

it's been two years. I still think about the place every day. are the others there still? or is the whole place abandoned now, thanks to me? sometimes I walk through the city and wonder where it might be. I know I will never find it. it could be in another city or another country. it could be anywhere.

I believe I've seen some of the others. three, four times maybe. in the city, in a crowd while I was running errands. people that look like me. I cannot be sure, though. that's the one thing I lost: my face, their face. I didn't approach them and they didn't acknowledge me. I wanted to. I was not able to. I cannot be sure it was really them. I don't know who let me out. I don't know why I was in that place, why they were there. why it even existed.

every day I think about that place. some days, I am overwhelmed. then, I keep lying in bed. I wish myself back into isolation. getting up and going to sleep. a hundred times. a million times. no use in counting. no use in struggling. but I know that's not true. it was never easy. I know I wished for it all to end. I know I would not be able to spend another day, another night, at that place. not having a choice.

maybe they are free. maybe they are still trapped, forever sealed in that air-tight container.