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SICK BAY

Nova Weetman



UQP

Meg

My current best friend is a brown paper bag that has a slight crease in the corner. I take it everywhere. This particular bag has been with me for about two months now, although it's getting ratty along the edges so it won't hold my air for much longer.

I stash my old bags in a drawer in my room because I can't bring myself to throw them out. After I hide the old one, I go hunting for a plain, recycled, thick paper bag that will withstand the force of my lungs blowing into it. Bags like that are harder to find than you might think. Mushroom bags are good, or bags that have held fancy loaves of bread. I tried naming my bags at the beginning, but it felt a bit sad, so now they're just The Bag.

I didn't always have The Bag for a friend. I used to have a real best friend. Her name was Eleanora. I was so impressed that someone with such a sophisticated name was my friend that I'd say her full name as often as I could. She had four syllables. I only have one. Meg. Actually, that's not true. It's Margaret, which I like even less than Meg. It's as dull as my mousy-brown hair.

Eleanora isn't around anymore. That makes it sound like she's dead. She's not. She just ditched me and made friends with other girls, who don't carry paper bags in their pockets, leaving me here, in Sick Bay, with mine.

Sick Bay is a fluoro-lit room down the corridor from the principal's office where The Bag and I sometimes spend part of the school day. At first my teachers tried to coax me back to their classrooms, although now they've accepted that I hang out here on occasion. Actually, if I were to fill in a questionnaire about how frequently I was in here, I'd probably lean towards the *Often* category. I like those questionnaires. I've filled in a few in the last year or so. There's something reassuring about seeing parts of your life broken down into a series of black marks in little boxes. It makes life feel more manageable.

The office lady, Sarah, who starts the day with

red lipstick on her lips and ends the day with it smeared on her teeth, even sneaks me in some left-over morning or afternoon tea. It might be a finger of banana bread or a couple of strawberry cream biscuits. The food makes me feel like I'm now one of Sick Bay's permanent residents, as regular as Dash Jones, the kid with asthma.

Sick Bay is about the size of a child's bedroom. There's a single bed that nobody ever wants to lie on because it's hard to imagine the sheets are changed very often, and what if the kid who used it before you had gastro and vomited on the pillows? And there's a pair of armchairs that are too brightly covered in red-and-yellow-patterned vinyl, like they've been stolen from the children's hospital where the furniture is all primary coloured to lift the mood of the patients. The only wall decoration is a poster of a healthy-eating food pyramid that is torn in one corner and there's a straw basket of picture books clearly left there for preps to read when they are having a bad day. When they built Bayview East Primary School, they should have consulted the students to see how many of us might need to frequently use Sick Bay because then they would have worked out it needs to be much larger than it is.

There's nothing pleasant about the room, but I still spend a lot of my time here. It's tricky to explain why. My friend The Bag knows why, although nobody else really does. Except for Sarah in the office because she knows everything about everyone in this school, although she's never actually said anything directly to me.

The reason I walked out of class today is because it's Thursday and on Thursdays we have an hour of PE and today we're running four laps of the mini oval and I happen to be wearing slippers and if I go to PE then my teacher will do two things: first he will lecture me about wearing inappropriate footwear, and then he will make me run anyway in the inappropriate footwear.

I'd like to think that if I were a teacher, I'd guess that wearing slippers to school wasn't through choice. And then maybe I'd investigate what else might be going on. My PE teacher isn't really one to ask questions though. He's a whistle man. He enjoys creating sharp noises and making us sweat.

Unsurprisingly, I'm really not up to PE today, so instead I'm in here, in Sick Bay, perched on my favourite of the chairs in the corner near the fridge. Usually I bring my book and re-read the passages I love, although I forgot it this morning.

From this spot I can see the corridor through the open door so I know when someone's coming. I like being prepared. I can also hear the hum of the fridge filling in time. For the past five minutes, I've been looking through the glass door of the fridge, reading the labels of the medicines. It's really the school's fault I'm doing this because if they don't want anyone knowing what medicines kids are taking they should keep them somewhere a bit more discreet.

I've now learned that Jacob in grade two is asthmatic, and Emily in grade four is anaphylactic if she comes into contact with chocolate, eggs or strawberries. Bummer, Emily. I thought it was hard having my life. Removing chocolate and strawberries is something else altogether. One kid is on Ritalin for ADHD, and someone else requires oral steroids. I didn't bother investigating Dash's medication because he told me all about it last year. It's like a miniature pharmacy in there.

'Hey,' a voice says from the corridor, and I look up as quickly as I can, trying to pretend that I'm not reading the labels after all.

It's Riley Jackson, another girl from grade six. She started at my school towards the end of last year so I don't really know her. She doesn't look so

good and I hope she's not about to vomit on me. She's tall and skinny and her ponytail is a bit messier than usual. She's in shorts and a patterned t-shirt, and she's wearing the black-and-white fabric bumbag she always wears around her waist. I've tried to find out about the bumbag but it makes it hard when I don't have anyone I can ask. Riley crashes in through the doorway and drops down on the bed. I jerk out of reach so we don't bump legs. Touching isn't really my thing.

'Riley, I'm calling your parents.' Sarah rushes in after her.

I look away from them. This is one of those moments when I hate being in Sick Bay. Two kids are definitely enough to fill this space; two kids and a grown-up who is taller than most dads makes it claustrophobic. I see Sarah look across at me and I clutch The Bag. It's a just-in-case clutch.

'No, I'm okay,' says Riley as the office phone starts ringing.

'You sure?' says Sarah.

'Yeah. I'm fine. Really,' she says in a very shaky voice.

'I have to get that. I'll be back to check on you,' says Sarah, rushing off again.

I wonder if Sarah expected to be a full-time receptionist and a full-time nurse when she took

this job. She's Mum's age, or maybe even older. Her hair is silvery in threads at the front but the rest is brown.

'What are you in here for?' says Riley, looking over at me.

'Carjacking.' I'm not about to tell her the truth.

She stabs a short laugh that's not entirely unfriendly and then stops, her face turning even whiter than when she came in.

'If you're going to vomit could you please direct it elsewhere?' I ask.

She gives me a strange look.

'You look rather pale,' I tell her.

'Nah, it's nothing. Hey, I like your t-shirt.'

I look down as if I'm trying to remember which one I'm wearing. Of course I know it's Gumby because it's always Gumby. I don't have any others that fit.

'Is it old?'

'Age is all relative, isn't it?'

'What?'

She manoeuvres her body so she's half sitting, half leaning back against the spotty-covered cushions. I notice her Converse at the same time she spies my slippers. I tuck my feet back under the legs of the chair like somehow that will make my slippers disappear, but she's still peering at my

feet. So, I take a deep breath and scrunch my eyes as tight as I can and practise seeing blue water.

‘What are you doing?’ Riley asks.

‘Relaxing,’ I tell her.

‘Good luck with that.’

I snap my eyes open. She’s watching me as she pops a bright green jelly bean into her mouth. Where did that come from? Then I notice a small bag of coloured jelly beans perched on her lap. My stomach flutters at the sight.

‘You want one?’

Riley holds out the bag and I can see the tremor in her hand. I take too long to decide and she sighs, so I grab the brightest thing I can see: a fluoro-blue bean. Instead of eating it, I grip it, feeling the thick sugar crust crush in my fist.

She eats another jelly bean and then tosses a pink one into the air and catches it in her mouth.

‘You should probably hide them from Sarah,’ I say. ‘We aren’t supposed to eat lollies at school.’

Riley laughs like I know nothing. Maybe she doesn’t care about rules.

‘Do I still look like I’m going to throw up?’

‘A bit.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m not.’ She sits forward. ‘This bed is all lumpy.’

‘That’s the germ bed.’

She looks down at the mattress. ‘Why?’

‘Unsurprisingly, the sheets are rarely washed.’

Riley laughs and the sound is light. ‘To be honest that makes me want to sit here even more!’

She wriggles to the edge of the bed and swings her Converse back and forth like she’s on a ride in a theme park. ‘You going to eat that lolly or just play with it?’

I unpeel my fingers and peek at the blue bean. I bite it in half, pretending for a second I can savour it, and then suddenly suck the whole thing into my mouth. It tastes like cheap grape jelly and my stomach rumbles for more.

‘Here, have as many as you want. I have heaps in my locker,’ says Riley, throwing me the plastic zip-lock bag.

I try to think of something smart to say, something that prevents her from knowing how much I want to eat the lot, although I can’t.

‘Have you done another test, Riley?’ asks Sarah, bustling back in.

I’m holding the lollies in full view and I wonder for a second if it was Riley’s intention that I get busted with them instead of her. I quickly wedge them between my back and the chair.

‘I was just about to,’ she says, unzipping the long bumbag from her hip and taking something

out. I can't quite see what it is because Sarah's now blocking my view. What test would she be doing? What's wrong with her?

I hear a beep and then Riley says, 'It's back up to four. I'm fine now.'

'Good. But I want you to stay here for another ten minutes and then you can go back to class. Okay?'

'Sure. That means I get out of PE,' says Riley lightly.

While Sarah's looking the other way, I manage to pop a green jelly bean into my mouth. This one is a strange lime flavour. I'm not sure I like it much.

Sarah leaves again and Riley sits up properly this time. She doesn't look white anymore.

I take a couple of jelly beans and pass the bag back. 'Thank you,' I say.

She shrugs and zips them into her bumbag. I wait, expecting her to tell me what she was testing.

'So, what's wrong with you?' she says instead.

I don't really know how to answer, so I quote a line from my favourite book. '*I'm in the depths of despair*,' I tell her.

She frowns at me and leans closer, peering at my face. 'You're what?'

I shrug, deciding it would be too hard to explain.

‘I thought this place was for sick people,’ she says, swinging her legs out of the bed.

‘It’s a public space, and despair is a medical condition,’ I say defensively.

‘It’s called Sick Bay and it’s for *sick* people. Just saying. I’m going to PE now. If Sarah comes back, tell her I left.’

She pushes past me, her hip banging into my elbow. When she reaches the doorway, she swivels and stares at me for a second, taking in my slippers again, and I can feel the stickiness of the jelly beans on my teeth. Then she walks off down the corridor and she’s gone, and I’m back to the hum of the fridge, reading the labels on the medicines and hanging with my friend The Bag.

Riley

Starting the school week with a conversation about how Nick Zarro apparently has a crush on me is not my idea of fun. I don't believe it for a second but my friends have been giggling and writing me notes about it. I don't like Nick much. He's too sure of himself and when he talks to me he always looks past me like I'm not very interesting. And when I first started at Bayview East Primary School, he made a joke about my insulin pump and told me I looked pregnant because of the bag I wear around my stomach with my testing kit. I've never forgiven him for that.

'He told Matt yesterday that he liked you,' whispers Lina.

'Whatever.' I resist adding an eye roll.

One of our teachers, Mr Sanderson, is midway through explaining BIDMAS to us and I really need to concentrate because I have no idea what he's talking about.

'Don't you like him even a bit?'

'No. Not one bit,' I say, louder than I intended.

'Riley Jackson? Do you want to come and explain this concept to the rest of the class?' Mr Sanderson has that teacher stare happening. I look away first.

'Um, no, sorry.'

I elbow Lina sharply, hoping she understands the physical code for *shut up*. She nudges me back and slides her notepad over. There's a line of grey sketchy love hearts that she's drawn as a border around the maths equations. This time, I go all out on the eye roll.

My friends at this school are always talking about boys. It's not that I don't like boys. I might. Or I might not. I'm just not even thinking about all that stuff yet. Besides, if I were going to have a crush on someone, it probably wouldn't be the boys in my class. And it would definitely not be Nick Zarro. Actually, that's what drives me mad about all these conversations. Apparently, if a boy likes me I'm supposed to be flattered and therefore sort of interested in him. It doesn't seem to matter

what I think of him. I explained this to Lina but she just looked at me like I was an alien and then told me I should be happy if someone's crushing on me. I fail to understand why.

'Riley, can I see you for a second?' Ms Barber, the year coordinator and my favourite of the grade six teaching team is standing in the doorway. I like her because she talks about gender and equality and cracks down hard on Matt Park and his friends who sometimes make really annoying jokes about the girls.

Mr Sanderson sighs as I get up to leave. He thinks maths is more important than pretty much anything else.

I follow Ms Barber out to the teachers' office in the grade six common space. The grade six students are in a beehive of rooms. There are five classes that all share the common space and we go to different rooms for different subjects. We're split off into our home groups for most classes, then come back together for weekly meetings. It's not like my old school in Sydney: desks in rows and small classrooms. Here it's all open learning and team teaching. The teachers' office is right in the middle so they can watch us at all times.

I don't get to come in here much, but whenever I do, I scan the desks and the walls as quickly as

I can, looking for information that may come in handy later. One desk is covered in confiscated Pokémon cards and another has several blocks of opened chocolate on it. There are notes scribbled in handwriting messier than mine stuck to the walls. Some are about students. Others are dates. I try to read them, but Ms Barber turns her head around to face me.

‘Mrs Myer would like you to make one of the speeches at graduation,’ she says.

Mrs Myer is the principal and we haven’t had much to do with each other. I frown, suspicious. ‘Why me?’

Ms Barber smiles. ‘You’re a good student. You’re a good leader and you’re ... you’re ...’

‘Different?’

‘We’re all different,’ says Ms Barber, trying to catch my eye.

I can’t help but smirk at her. Graduation is five and a half weeks away. But apparently, it’s a huge deal at this school. There’s a dinner and an afterparty disco in the gym and everyone gets super dressed up. My friends have been talking about it for ages. It sounded like fun, until I was chosen to make some sort of poxy speech in front of everyone. We both know the reason I’m being asked. Even though I’ve only been here for a year,

I've already gathered that Mrs Myer likes to showcase the points of difference in her school, like somehow they better reflect on her leadership.

'Don't be too cynical, Riley. You're one of our strongest students.'

When I started at this school after we moved down from Sydney for Dad's work, it was Ms Barber who checked in every few weeks to make sure I was okay. She was the teacher who did diabetes training so I could go on excursions without Mum freaking out. For weeks, until I became friends with Lina and the others, I would hang out with Ms Barber at lunchtime and talk about cats. Hers is called Lizard, because it slinks around and lies in the sunniest spots in the backyard, soaking up the warmth. We used to have a cat called Jelly but it stayed in Sydney with Granny because she said if we were all abandoning her, the least we could do was leave her the cat.

'Sorry,' I tell her.

'It's a big deal.'

'Okay ...' I force a smile, making an effort because I like her.

'And how are you feeling about graduating? About high school?'

I pretend to think, when actually I don't know the answer. 'Fine. Excited.'

Ms Barber nods and I notice the piercings in her ear, the flash of green when she moves her head. ‘Transitioning to high school can seem pretty overwhelming.’

‘I’ve moved states *and* schools. It’ll be fine.’ But even to me, this sounds like a lie. Leaving Sydney was horrible.

I’ve been trying *not* to think about finishing primary school because my friends aren’t coming with me. I’m going to the local high school. My friends are going to private schools. Lina’s been desperate to talk Mum into sending me to the same school as her, but there is no way my parents will go private. They both went to public schools and they think they turned out okay. It’s one of the rare things they agree on, other than my bedtime and the amount of carbohydrates in a banana.

I also know that starting at a new school again means more explanations about diabetes and the bumbag I wear. It means I’ll have to answer annoying questions and find somewhere private to do a test that isn’t the toilets. I’ve never liked hiding out in a smelly cubicle to do a test.

Before Ms Barber can grill me any longer, there’s a little knock on the glass, and I see Meg hovering.

‘Come in, Meg,’ says Ms Barber warmly.

Meg stares at me as she shuffles into the room and sits next to Ms Barber. Until we spoke to each other in Sick Bay last week, we'd never had a conversation. I don't know her deal but there are plenty of rumours about how poor she is, and how strange. She's wearing the Gumby t-shirt again so maybe it's the only one she has. It sort of annoyed me that she was in Sick Bay when she didn't need to be. It's not like *I* have a choice.

'Meg, Mrs Myer has requested that you make a graduation speech at the ceremony. Riley is making one too,' says Ms Barber.

From the look on Meg's face, I'd say she's even more suspicious about this request than I am.

'Sorry, but I don't like the sound of that,' says Meg.

'You'll be fine. I'll be right there with you,' says Ms Barber gently.

Meg holds up a wrinkled brown paper bag and shakes it at Ms Barber. 'I can't.'

Now I'm intrigued. What's in the bag?

'I'll help you,' says Ms Barber quietly.

'I'm not going to graduation anyway,' says Meg clearly.

'Why not?'

'It's just a chance to wear a dress and brag about yourself,' Meg tells Ms Barber.

I smile a little, trying to hide it behind my hand, but I sort of agree.

‘Whoa! Why don’t you tell me what you really think?’ says Ms Barber.

I don’t actually think Ms Barber minds Meg’s honesty. She’s one of those teachers you can say anything to. I like the way she tries to catch Meg’s eye, before saying, ‘You don’t have to come. But you do have to write a speech. You’re the best writer in grade six. Mrs Myer wants a diverse spread of students. Blow us away, I know you can.’

Meg looks at me and takes a noisy breath. I’d love to know what she’s thinking.

‘Okay, well you two will have to meet with Mrs Myer at some point. She hasn’t chosen the boys yet, but she will.’

The lunch bell goes, and instantly there is noise around us. Meg scurries off and I notice her slippers again. Who wears slippers to school?

‘If you have any questions, just come and find me, Riley,’ says Ms Barber.

I head out of the office into the rush. Everyone’s stampeding to put away their books and their folders and grab their lunch boxes. Today I’m slow. Swallowed up in the hurry.

‘Look!’ Lina bops up in front of me, holding a bunch of pale green envelopes. She’s beaming.

I know what they are. She's been telling us about this for weeks.

'Awesome! I love the colour.'

'Yeah, me too. I was going to choose blue.'

'To be honest, green is much nicer,' I tell her.

'It's mint, not green. Come on,' she says, grabbing my arm.

'Toilet,' I tell her, lying. 'I'll meet you out there.'

She pulls a face, but then notices Elle and Tessa heading outside. 'Whatevs,' she says, impatient to catch up with our other friends.

I'm supposed to check my blood glucose levels before I eat, like every time before I eat a meal. And I sort of haven't been lately. But after ending up in Sick Bay last week, I'm trying to be more careful because Mum's lectures are next level. I'd rather wait and do it alone in the empty common room than outside where everyone eats lunch and can see. It's not just that though. My friends don't really understand how often I'm supposed to do a test. They think it's a part-time kind of condition, one that should fit in with my life. Not the other way round. Sometimes, if I do a test in front of them, one of them might want to help, which means they want to prick and squeeze my finger so a drop of blood bubbles up. They also love sticking the strip into the meter and waiting for the beep.

I really hate it when they want to tell me the reading too, like I'm their patient.

I'm diabetic, if you didn't already know that. I have an insulin pump that goes straight into my stomach, which I've had since I was in grade four. The pump is attached to a thin plastic tube that has a soft cannula at the end. The cannula is inserted under my skin every few days. If I didn't have the pump then I'd have to inject insulin into myself, which I'd hate, particularly at school. I have to calculate the grams of carbohydrates for the food I eat and then put them into the insulin pump and then the pump releases the insulin for me.

It's fine most of the time, except when I forget to do a reading before I eat, or if I over calculate or under calculate the grams of carbohydrates, or deliberately forget altogether. Then it's not fine. Then I'll either have a high or a low and if I have a low I have to treat it with jelly beans. And Mum lectures me. That's why I occasionally end up in Sick Bay. I also might have a low or a high if I've exercised, if I'm sick or for something random. Sometimes I feel low at netball and Mum makes me come off the court. There are heaps of things that can throw out my readings, not just food.

Having diabetes also means endless explanations to newbies about why I wear a bumbag

(to carry the pump and test kit of course!). Some people suggest the stupidest theories. Like, it's because I'm a robot. Yep. Thanks Matt Park. Hilarious. Or another favourite is that it's my spy phone. That was Thomas someone in grade four in Sydney. As if. Isabelle Doherty used to joke with her friends that it was an illegal listening device and they should all stay away from me. Joy. It also means I sometimes get treated differently. I hate that most. I try to hide the bumbag, but it can be hard, particularly if I'm wearing fitted clothes or if I have to take out my pump to put in carbohydrates.

I've been diabetic for years now. When I first had symptoms Mum didn't know what was wrong with me. By the time she took me to the doctor, I was hours away from diabetic ketoacidosis (or DKA as the doctors like to call it) and I could have died. I think it still freaks her out to think about it. Even though my parents never admit it, they totally wish I was just like all the other kids. But I'm not. I have type 1 diabetes. I have to say 'type 1' because otherwise people assume I'm type 2 and then they blame you and think it's your fault because you eat too much junk food. As if. People can be so judgemental.

To be honest (or TBH as I like to say) I sort of think it's only my fingers and my stomach that are

diabetic. The rest of me is pretty normal. I'm not supposed to use that word. Mum always corrects me when I do. Tells me there's no such thing as normal and it's just a construct and yadayadayada. I tune out when she goes into psych speech. She's a psychologist so there's a lot of that sort of talk. Secretly, I call her The Brain.

I know she's right. But what she doesn't get is that I don't feel normal or abnormal. I know there's nothing wrong with me, and I know being the same as everyone else does not make you 'normal', but the only parts of me that are directly injected or pricked are my fingers and my tummy. So, I think of myself in two halves – the body bits that are tested and the body bits that aren't. I haven't tried to explain that to Mum. I'm sure she'd think it was stupid, but it makes sense to me.

I turn away from the few kids who are still riffing around in their lockers and prick my finger. I feel how hard the end of the skin is from where it's been jabbed thousands of times. I like the toughness of the skin. I squeeze the tip and a perfect red bead pops out. I insert the strip into the meter and then add a small drop of blood to the end of the testing strip. There's a beep and the number 5.2 is displayed. My blood glucose level is within the range it should be. Mum will be happy.

When I look up, I see Meg watching me from the other side of the room. She's fully staring, which is sort of creepy because nobody else is in here.

'You right, Slipper Girl?' I call out. I hate being watched while I do a test.

My words must break the spell because she spins around and hurries off. Maybe she's heading to the Sick Bay, even though she's not even sick. I can't believe anyone would want to hang out in there if they didn't have to.