



Under the Weather

Mia's nose was stuck in her own armpit. Not a lot of glamour there, but she was working toward a higher purpose.

“Think of how your organs are thanking you for acknowledging *them*, for being considerate enough to stretch *them*.” Delia's voice floated from the front of the room where, Mia knew without looking, she joined the class in a binding pose that could make most grown men cry like little girls.

Mia breathed an audible breath, collecting a healthy whiff of deodorant-infused sweat. In the nose, out the nose, throat relaxed. She closed her eyes, feeling the ends of her fingers beginning to slip out of the bind. *Liver, pancreas, you're welcome*, she thought and felt her stomach make an uncharacteristic lurch. The radiator kicked in beside where she stood, infusing heat and a bass hum to the room. Mia focused on an unmoving spot on the floor and not on the

spandexed and heaving tush of the woman on the mat in front of her.

“And now using the muscles in your core, slooowly release and come back to mountain pose.” Delia manipulated her voice and cadence to stretch like honey. On any other day, her instructor’s voice sounded like a lullaby to Mia, a quiet but persistent reminder to breathe deeply and recycle paper and plastic. Today, though, Mia felt an urge to ask Delia to speak up. She wanted concrete sounds, solid sounds; the feathery intonations landing lightly around the room made her insides itch. She pulled out of the bind and stood at the top of her mat, feet planted, palms outturned.

“Feel better yet?” Frankie whispered to Mia from the mat next to her.

Mia sighed. “Not yet.”

“Let’s move into our warrior sequence.” Delia modeled the correct form on her lime-green mat and the class obediently followed suit.

Four poses later Mia hadn’t shaken the bug she’d hoped was just an out-of-sorts feeling to be shed with a good workout. She felt elderly, cranky. Not even downward-facing dog had brought any relief. She lay on her back during the last minutes of class, trying to melt into the floor, *be* the floor. The spandexed woman was snoring. This final pose, savasana, was intended to provide participants final moments to recover, to be still and let their minds quiet before reentering the chaos of the outside world. Most yoga aficionados soaked up the pose. In Mia’s class she’d spotted a plump, permed woman wearing a sweatshirt that declared in stark black print *I’m just here for the savasana*.

Today, though, Mia couldn't keep her eyes shut. She curled and flexed her toes, wishing Delia would crank up some Stones or Black Crowes instead of the Tibetan chimes lilting out of the stereo. Her impatience with a woman who freely quoted Mr. Rogers was beginning to worry her. Even in the hush of the room, her thoughts continued in an unruly spin, and when Delia brought everyone back to lotus, Mia glimpsed a scowl on her reflection in the mirror.

"Let's just enjoy the long, strong feeling of our bodies," Delia said. Her eggplant yoga gear revealed taut muscles. "Our organs are thanking us for a good massage."

Right. Organs. Mission accomplished, Mia thought, trying to concentrate on the gratitude her body owed her. But her mind crowded with images of bloody, squishy masses, pulsating or writhing in the way organs must do, and she found herself springing from her mat and bolting to the back of the studio. She threw open the door to the ladies' room and gripped the toilet bowl in a new pose, aptly christened Riotous and Unexplained Retching.



"Mia?" Frankie's voice was subdued, even though a postclass din was making its way through the restroom door.

Mia emerged from the stall. "I guess sun salutations weren't such a good idea." She washed her face and hands at the sink, trying not to inhale too deeply the scent of eucalyptus rising from the soap. She watched her face in the mirror, noting the pale purple circles under her eyes that persisted even with the extra sleep she'd indulged in that week. Mia smoothed her eyebrows with clammy fingers, taking care

not to tug the small silver piercing, and glimpsed Frankie's concerned expression in the mirror. "Don't worry," Mia said. "I feel much better now. Must just be a virus."

Frankie handed over Mia's coat and a hemp bag proclaiming *Save the Seals*. "I'll walk you home. Let's stop at Gerry's store for soup and crackers."

Mia made a face. "Crackers, yes. Soup, definitely not."

Outside the studio, weak February sunshine played hide-and-seek with wispy cloud cover. Frankie planted her arm around Mia's waist.

Mia glanced at her friend. "I like the blue."

Frankie turned her head to showcase the full effect. "Do you? I meant for it to be more baby blue, less sapphire, but I got distracted with this crazy woman on the Home Shopping Network and left the dye on too long."

In the two years Mia had known her, Frankie had demonstrated a keen affection for adventurous hair coloring. Magenta (advent of spring), emerald green (popular in March), black and white stripes (reflecting doldrums after a breakup), now blue. The rainbow tendency endeared Frankie to Mia, who'd braved an extended though unsuccessful flirtation with dreadlocks during college, but otherwise had settled for a comparatively conformist 'do of patchouli-scented chestnut curls.

"How did this change go over with Frau Leiderhosen?"

Frankie whistled. "She *loved* it. In fact she wondered if we could have a girls' night out this weekend and take turns trading beauty secrets."

Mia snorted, which was an unfortunate and unavoidable

byproduct of her laughter. The snorts only encouraged Frankie.

“But, Esteemed Employer,’ I said, ‘I can’t possibly instruct the master! A mere mortal such as I? It’d be like a Chihuahua taking over the dressing room of J-Lo! Or Sophia Loren! Or Gisele Bundchen, a woman who shares with you, dear boss, an impressive German name and an uncanny sense of style!’”

“Stop it.” Mia clutched her stomach and groaned. “Yoga and laughter are off limits until further notification from my digestive tract.”

Frankie sighed. “I do feel sorry for her. I never should have shown up with a mousy blonde bob cut for the initial interview. I was *so* average librarian.” She shook her head as they slowed near Gerry’s Grocery. “Only to turn on her the first week on the job.”

It had occurred to Mia more than once how much she could have benefited from a green-haired librarian in the small Nebraska town where she’d grown up. Not until she was well into adulthood did she realize that not all librarians were employed to scare children, like the dreaded circulation director at Cedar Ridge Municipal Branch with the spidery braid and hairy mole. Mia had cowered behind the legs of her father when he would stop in to check out an eight-track or the latest release by Louis L’Amour. The moled woman had snapped at Mia once when she’d fingered a book on a stand, announcing down her nose that the book of Mia’s interest was for display only and could not be checked out. Never mind that *Bird Calls of the Northeast* had not exactly beckoned to eight-year-old Mia anyway, but the chastisement was enough to keep books at an arm’s length for years. How different Mia’s interest in reading could have been had a spitfire like Frankie been the one behind the desk!

Frankie's supervisor, Ms. Nachtmusik, with her impossible surname that changed with each conversation, didn't know the gift Frankie was to her patrons.

"Hello, ladies." Gerry looked over his glasses. He stopped pecking madly at a calculator on the front counter. "How are things with you?"

"Mia's sick, Gerry." Frankie patted Mia on the head. "We need sick stuff."

Gerry pushed back on his stool and stood. He clucked like an unusually tall occupant of a henhouse. "Sick, Miss Mia? Headache? Stomach? Fever?"

Mia shook her head. "Stomach, I guess. I think crackers will be enough."

Gerry looked disgusted. "This is not your duty to decide. Miss Frankie and I will take care of the illness. Sit." He pointed to his stool and waved at her impatiently when she didn't jump at his command. Gerry shuffled off, muttering about the tragedy of young people living in cities without their parents.

Mia slipped Frankie a rolled-up reusable shopping bag and whispered, "Make sure to steer him away from pesticides."

Frankie winked at Mia and skipped behind the man on his mission.

Mia greeted the next few patrons entering the store. She tried watching the game show on Gerry's small black-and-white, but she couldn't seem to follow the rules. *I'll just lay my head here for a moment*, she thought, pushing Gerry's calculator aside.



“Oh, good heavenly gracious, we need to call an ambulance!” Gerry’s words seeped like molasses through Mia’s subconscious. She wondered who was injured and if it had anything to do with the impossible rules on that game show.

“Mia, honey, are you okay?” Frankie was tugging on her shoulder.

“Hmm?” Mia pulled her eyelids open into the glare of fluorescent lights. Her head was, indeed, on the front counter, but so was the rest of her body. She turned her head slowly to face Frankie, who had crouched down beside her and was inches from her face. “I’m lying on the conveyer belt.”

“Yes, yes, you are,” Frankie said while guiding Mia to a sitting position. She gauged her tone of voice to fit a three-year-old on Sudafed. “Gerry and I left to get some groceries and when we returned,” she enunciated, “you were lying on the counter.” She nodded up and down, up and down.

Mia shook her head. “I was really tired. I needed to sleep.” Her voice trailed off. She kept her hands on her face for a moment, fingers brushing past a stud in her right nostril and the ring in her eyebrow. Eyes open, she peeked through the cracks in her fingers. Behind Gerry, who was patting his pockets frantically for cigarettes that hadn’t been there since he’d quit a decade before, stood his son, Adam. Mia tried running her fingers through her yoga-tangle of hair.

Adam cleared his throat and smiled.

Mia realized she’d dropped her hands and had commenced a creepy stare session. “Hi, Adam,” she said too loudly. “How are you?”

Adam bit his cheek in an attempt to take seriously a question coming from a woman sprawled next to a cash register. “I’m great, Mia. You?”

“Fantastic,” she said and swung her legs to the side of her perch. Gerry rushed forward to offer her his arm, Adam close behind. Mia held up her hands in protest. “I’m fine, really,” she said. “Just a little tired, apparently.” She walked slowly to the front door and turned to wave. “Thanks, Gerry. You’re a great host. Adam, good to see you. Frankie, are you ready?” She opened the door without waiting for a response and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Gerry pushed away Frankie’s twenty-dollar bill and handed her the sack of sick stuff as she fell in behind her friend.



They walked five minutes in silence. Dusk was long gone, the sun having set early in the February evening. Mia was from the Midwest and didn’t much mind Chicago winters; Frankie, however, hailed from Southern California and moaned every few steps as wind from the lake found its way through coats and mittens and headed straight for skin.

“I will never know why we have chosen this misery.” Frankie held Mia at the crook of her arm like a geriatric patient. Mia felt too exhausted to protest. At the foot of the stairs leading to her apartment building, she stopped. She watched a dapper older gentleman with mocha skin descend the steps and allow his eyes to fall on her.

“Hey, Silas,” she said.

“Evening, girls,” Silas said. He dropped his keys in the side

pocket of his suit and tipped his hat, a soft brown fedora trimmed in striped black ribbon. He cocked his head slightly and narrowed his gaze at Mia. “Girl, you don’t look so hot.” Silas furrowed his brow and looked at Frankie. “What’s the story, Francesca?”

“We’re not sure,” Frankie said. “But don’t worry. I’m taking her straight upstairs before she can toss her cookies again.”

Silas took a nimble step back, sidestepping puddles in his retreat. “Honey, I’m sorry. Ain’t no fun getting sick.”

“Thanks,” Mia said. She handed him a box of Lorna Doones from her stash of groceries. “Brought your favorites. Goodness knows I won’t be needing a visit with Miss Lorna this evening,” she said, wrinkling her nose at the thought.

Silas clucked and shook his head. “Your mama raised you right, girl. I thank God for you, Mia, and I know my dear Bonnie is happy to look down from glory and see me so well taken care of.” He patted her gloved hand. “I couldn’t ask for a better neighbor. You get better now, you hear?”

The girls took the steps slowly. When they reached the front door and waited for Mia to fish keys out of her bag, Frankie cleared her throat.

“So, um, what was that business at Gerry’s all about?”

Mia shook her head. She dug deeper in her purse. “This is one bizarre virus. I don’t even remember making the decision to go to sleep.”

“Yes, right. I didn’t mean the counter episode. I meant the eye-lock with Gerry’s son.”

“Found them,” Mia said and pushed her key into the lock. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

“Hair-fixing, googly-eye thing with Fig Leaf.”

Mia tried to look disapproving. “You and your nicknames. I like the name Adam. I cringe to think of what you call me behind my back.”

“Hmm,” Frankie said. “Today would be a toss-up between Vomitronica and Queen of Feigned Emotional Distancing.”

“I’m not feigning anything, for those of us who’ve read too much Jane Austen,” Mia said. She led the way into the lobby elevator and pushed the button for the fourth floor. The door closed with a shudder and Mia shrugged. “It’s really nothing.”

Frankie crossed her arms and positioned her finger above the emergency stop button.

“All right.” Mia sighed. “When I first moved to my apartment, I was momentarily single and also in need of a neighborhood grocery. I found Gerry’s, and Adam was always there with his perfect smile and impeccable Persian manners.” She sighed and watched the numbers light up on their ascent.

“Oh, my gosh. This is so *Rear Window*.”

“Isn’t that the one where the woman is paralyzed?”

“No,” Frankie said with labored patience. “That’s *An Affair to Remember*. I’m hinting less at paralysis, more at love at first sight.”

Mia rolled her eyes as the elevator door opened. “I noticed him, he noticed me, we flirted, and then I was no longer single.” Mia stepped into the hallway. “It was nothing. Seriously. As you might remember, I’m happily in love with another man. End of story.” She led the way to her apartment door. “Sorry to disappoint. I *was* recovering from an episode, remember.”

“Exactly!” Frankie was triumphant. “Your defenses were down, you were caught off guard and didn’t have time to censor what was and wasn’t socially appropriate—”

“Shh. He might be home.” Mia paused at her apartment door and ignored Frankie’s dramatic jab of her finger down her throat.

“That would be *so* unusual,” Frankie said, *sotto voce*. “You can’t mean he would be eating your food and smashing organic potato chips under his rear as he watches *Baywatch* reruns on *your* couch?”

Mia called into the room, “Anybody here?”

Frankie muttered, “Because we wouldn’t expect you to be anywhere else.”

Mia pinched Frankie’s arm when she heard rustling in the living room. “Lars?”

He stepped into the entryway, blond hair tousled, mouth opened in a wide yawn. “Hey, babe,” he said around his yawn. “Hey, Frankie.”

“Hi, Lars,” Frankie said sweetly. Mia avoided eye contact with her friend and instead pulled her arms around Lars and gave him her cheek to kiss.

“Don’t exchange any of my germs,” she said. “I think I’m sick.”

Lars stepped back, nudging Mia out of the embrace. “Really?” He wrinkled his nose. “Like puking sick?”

Mia unbuttoned her coat. Frankie tugged her friend’s arms out of the sleeves and unwrapped her from a bulky crocheted scarf. “Like, *totally* puking sick,” she said, watching Lars for any recognition of her mocking tone. None detected, she rambled on. “She, like, ralphed after yoga and then at Gerry’s she *totally* fell asleep under the scanner.”

Lars had turned and was heading for the fridge. Mia shot a pleading look at Frankie, who sighed and nodded a momentary truce.

“You should have called and told me you were going to the store. We’re almost out of soy milk,” he said, nose in the fridge. “And I ate the last Carob Joy after lunch.”

Mia filled a glass with water. Lars had piled his dishes in the sink, and it occurred to her to thank him, as this was a marked improvement from finding them all over the apartment, crusty, molding, and sometimes neglected until they smelled of rot. Determined not to conjure up any more detail of those images and too tired to explain to Frankie later why dirty dishes piled in the sink was a step upward, she sipped her water and shuffled toward the bedroom.

“Thanks, Frankie, for taking care of me,” she said. “I owe you. But I can’t think about it right now, okay?”

Frankie followed her into the bedroom. She turned the covers down as Mia undressed and placed a saucer of crackers on the bedside table. “You take care of yourself, do you hear me?” For a woman with blue hair, Frankie could command the maternal authority of Olivia Walton when summoned. “Call me tomorrow morning. Or before if you need me. Not that Lars isn’t the nurturing, restorative type ...”

Mia moaned. She lowered herself into bed and curled up into a fetal position.

“All right, all right.” Frankie spoke softly. She turned out the light. “Sleep well, Mimi.” She waited a moment for an answer from under the down comforter but Mia was already drifting toward sleep.