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The Third Tower

THERESE

Julia found it in a pile of old stuff. She didn't want it, so she said she would give it to Therese.

What was she supposed to do with that? Therese said—a beaten up old book with nothing in it but blank paper.

Well, you like to do handwriting, Julia said.

Therese looked at the thing her friend was holding. Then she reached for it.

Julia laughed and her black curls bounced.

That night, Therese puts it away, under her socks—her dear, neatly folded socks. And the next night when she remembers and takes it out, it seems she has come to love it in her sleep, and through the long day at work. Maybe she'll even take it with her on her trip.

It looks like an ancient thing, with its soft, red cover. It looks like it has some tales to tell, hidden in those blank pages. She runs her fingers over the thick, rough paper, as if to awaken it...

TRAIN

Back in the day, railroad tracks crisscrossed the entire country and trains sped morning and night to every corner of the great expanse.

That's what Therese has heard. She thinks she's heard that. Or maybe it's a scrap from a dream—or maybe it's just an error of her brain; maybe there were no trains at all.

Who knows. But what's sure is there's one train now—and it goes through the town where she lives, all the way to the City, where the hospital complex is—lucky!

Felix has hired a temp to cover for her. He's promised to keep her on when she gets back, one way or another. She's a good little worker, he says. But for now, the spells have gotten so bad they're slowing her down.

When he arranged for her to go for the cure, he looked sad, she told Julia.

Hm, Julia had said noncommittally.

And it's true that Felix always has the same expression—pretty much all the old people do—of vague helplessness, as though they've just entered a day full of the troubles they've spent the night dreaming about.

But in any case, Therese is going to see the City!

Of course, they've all seen it a million times in movies and magazines—the brilliant air, the glistening towers and monuments, sailboats gliding from the serene harbor out toward the endless horizon—the gorgeous, gorgeously dressed men and women, the broad white boulevards, banks of flowers, grand restaurants, magnificent shop windows—great, heavy strands of gems twinkling away on velvet...

None of the girls from housing has ever gotten to go there until now, and the others are all jealous.

Really? Therese asks; do they want to go pitching over at random moments like she does? She'd trade any day. (Though, maybe she wouldn't, actually.)

But she'll be their eyes and ears, she promises.

The seats are so comfortable, even here in community class. There's a slight, thrilling jolt, and her heart lifts up as the wheels begin to purr against the tracks.

This morning, Julia knocked on the door of her room and gave her a cardboard box containing a sandwich and an apple so she won't go hungry on the trip.

Actually, she's already hungry, even though she's just settled onto the train. But she won't open the box yet.

Box! The word is starting to glow and shimmer—

Therese reaches into her satchel for her book and the pen she stole from laundry when Kyra wasn't looking—but she's too late to do whatever it was she meant to; the word has already exploded and now what's left of it is just a hard, dry little wad: box. OK, box. But she's sort of exhausted, as if she has awakened too abruptly from a profound sleep.

Now there's just darkness—a tunnel, it must be.

Now it's bright and her town is gone!

She plays a brand-new game on the seat screen, featuring zooming

blobs that look like candy. Glossy! You shoot the blobs, and if you hit one just right, it emits a shower of gold coins, and then new blobs zoom in to try to eat the coins before you shoot them too.

The rays of the sun slant at the sooty windows, moving this way and that as the train crosses over a shining river of thick, rainbow-colored mud.

But where on earth *are* they? Therese has never seen places like *this* in movies or magazine pictures—these towns! Where no person is to be seen, where the windows are broken or covered over with boards and plastic, everywhere heaps of rusted, rotted trash with here and there a chair leg or part of an antiquated vehicle or a torn, filthy doll, sticking up from it...

The desolation spreads out and out, as if someone had tipped over a colossal container of wreckage by mistake.

A tiny train moves through the wreckage, carrying a minuscule speck called Therese. The train clacks slowly over another bridge—a rickety little thing spanning a cleft in the earth—and sits up a swarm of children, who run along below, trying to keep up. Their faces are streaked with paint, or dirt. They scamper and tumble like wicked little demons, but the rocks and bottles they throw just bounce off the train's metal shell, and zoom—now they're just tiny, squiggling specks themselves.

It's cold, Therese realizes. And her speck self is speeding farther and farther from her friends... She holds the box Julia gave her tightly and looks around at the other passengers, but they're inseparably focused on their screens or devices and their faces are closed...

The sights stream by out the window, wavering, not quite solid, like pictures unfurling on a bolt of printed silk. Now there are woods. And raked-over fires, it looks like. More trash... an old boot? A ragged shirt...

A few weeks ago at supper, one of the girls said she'd heard that a bunch of criminals had escaped from the prison complexes. Could Therese be traveling through that part of the country?

Fugitives—the word erupts from its casing, flaring up like a rocket, fanning out, fracturing the air into prisms and splintered mirror. Therese snatches up her book and pen, and rapidly writes something down.

She's sweating. She closes her eyes and takes a few deep breaths before she looks at what the book says: *Uniforms—teams, prisoners and guards, shouting, clanging—blood and weapons. Two civil guards stumbling through trees, they trip on twisted roots, they carry a heavy*

pole, one of the guards at each end, a man hangs from it, roped to it by bleeding wrists and ankles...

She stares at the words in the book. Horrible!

A good thing she's heading toward the hospital—maybe the excitement of travel is bad for her.

She glances out the window and takes a few more deep breaths.

No, she's OK—the glass-dust is settling, and the air is coming back together...

Good, and the woods are behind them now.

Oh, funny!—the pen has a tag on it that says, Return To Laundry.

She watches a whole series of cartoons about a cheerful creature they call a platypus. And anyhow, her town is normal—a normal, busy town. The malls are filled with people shopping.

Besides, those men in the woods—that was just a picture.

The sandwich and apple are eaten, and they have arrived. Therese brushes some crumbs off the empty box, folds it flat, and tucks it into her satchel along with her good dress—she's brought her good dress—and her book, of course.

DOCTOR

Patient T716-05: Female, 17 yrs., 8 mos. Worker, intelligence average, height/weight/appearance ditto. Word-stabilization reflex far below average. Mental "crowding" or "smearing" excess liquidity of intellection. Fainting occasional but rare. Complaint suggests aberrant cortical activity, diagnosis as yet uncertain. It is to be hoped that a course of repetition modification in conjunction with indicated elaboration-suppressants ("fuzz-offs," as the kids call them) can be devised to alleviate symptoms.

ASSESSMENT

Tree, the doctor says.

Tests make her so nervous! Tree—how is she supposed to keep that under control? It's already threatening to break apart! She looks at the doctor, but he's studying the ridiculous-looking contraption she's hooked up to.

Tree please, he says.

Leaf, she guesses.

The doctor, watching some dials, frowns.

She tries again: shade.

Just whatever comes to mind, the doctor says.

Trunk? Therese says.

Trunk? The doctor says. He sighs and takes off his goggles. It's important for you to say exactly what's in your mind, Therese, not what you think I want you to say. If I could wave a magic wand and make your symptoms disappear, I would not hesitate. Unfortunately, the process is more complicated than that, and we need your full commitment. There is no "right answer." What I want to hear is your spontaneous response, the one that comes immediately to mind when I say the cue word. Deception has no place here with us, nor does shame—the machine registers your sincerity. Any truthful response whatsoever is acceptable.

His smile illustrates patience and forbearance. Or probably that's a smile. His face is basically a broad stack of thick, rather squashy-looking layers, so it's hard to tell exactly.

So, he says. Do we understand one another?

Therese nods solemnly.

All right, then, he resumes: tree.

Any truthful response whatsoever... She's pretty dizzy, actually, and now the word is really taking over, glowing, and shimmering wildly, as the air breaks up and a breeze sends light and shadows tumbling through the garden. Inside the old-fashioned house there, a child deliberates over the instrument's keys, searching for the notes signified by graceful markings on the page. Released by the child's touch, the notes detach, wavering off the page and out the open French doors, one or two or three at a time, landing awkwardly on the leaves of the magnificent oak, where they teeter for a moment before evaporating into the diaphanous air. A delicate strain of music floats in their wake, like a fragrance.

Piano! Therese says loudly.

Excuse me? The doctor says. He peers at the dials, then thumps the machine, and frowns at the dials again. Excuse me—he turns to her—you said...?

The music is evaporating now too, leaving only a phantom imprint on her senses, like the warm imprint left on a sheet by a sleeper recently arisen.

Piano—was that your response, Therese? The doctor's voice paints rough black streaks over what's left of the melody. Do you play the piano, Therese?

Does she play the piano? Huh? How could she play the piano? She's never even *seen* a piano, not a real one, anyhow! Oh—goodbye garden, goodbye marvelous tree, goodbye child, whoever you are... Up the sleeper goes, rising into the day, this particular day, which assembles around Therese into the gray, somewhat dingy consulting room, where the doctor, sitting across from her, waits for an answer.

ROOM

She has been assigned a room (614). It has a window, and a cot made up with sheets and a blanket, and a little table with a drawer in it where she puts her things.

Nothing extra. They explain: it's important for her to have as little *sensory stimulation* as possible.

In other words, she understands, nothing to set her off. There's no mirror, there are no curtains on the window, just metal shutters that are kept closed to shield her from the glittering sound of the city, from the sunlight, from the mysterious moon.

Her teachers said shed grow out of it, but it's only gotten worse since school—words heating up, expanding, exploding into pictures of things, shooting off in all directions, then flaming out, leaving behind cinders and husks, a litter of tiny, empty, winged corpses, like scorched gnats or angels.

It's too bad about the shutters though. Especially because the train arrived here through a tunnel, just the way it had departed from her town—as though the journey between tunnels was nothing more than a soap bubble—and then, in the station, she had stood on a moving strip of something or other that took her straight into the walled hospital complex. So she still hasn't had a look at the City.

For that matter, since the train arrived, she's hardly seen the sky.

FORMS

They sit her at a screen and she fills out scrolls and scrolls of forms. Hundreds of questions.

Her eyes and ears work fine. She's never broken a bone. Once at an Independence Day party in housing, there were some strawberries, and a few of the girls, including her, broke out in a rash that bled. But strawberries are her only allergy, as far as she knows.

She doesn't take any medications. No alcohol, no tobacco, no recreational drugs. Yes, she gets her periods. They're normal (she supposes). They started about four years ago. No, she has never had a child. (Obviously. In housing? What, are they kidding, these people here? How do they think that sort of thing happens!)

Any family history of heart problems, as far as she knows? Cancer? Diabetes? Crohn's Disease? Bright's Disease? Kefauver's Disease? Degenerative diseases of the spine or the nervous system? Malformations of the limbs or of other parts? Disorders of the lungs, liver, gall bladder?

On a scale of one to one hundred how well does she cope with stress? On a scale of one to one hundred how anxious does she feel? Is she willing to let the clinic divulge information about her to the registry? (Treatment is contingent on acceptance.) Who should they call in case of emergency? (Yes, who? Felix? Julia? Housing?) Does she give the clinic permission to perform X sort of test, Y sort of test, Z sort of test? Of course she does—why is she there, if not for X, Y and Z sorts of tests? Then initial here, please—initial here, initial here.

She waits in a room, and after a while she's led into another room to see the doctor again.

He sits at his large desk and calls up on his screen the questionnaire she spent the morning filling out. He explains that although of course he is already familiar with her answers, he wants to scroll quickly through, reviewing.

Ah, he says, yes—what does she mean, precisely, by this sensation of confusion she refers to? Would she please describe it as exactly as she can?

He swivels the screen so she can see it.

Confusion—right, that's what she herself typed in, but now the word looks stark. Like a...warrant. A warrant?

Just give it a try, he says.

She's very thirsty, but she is taking up so much of the busy doctor's time! If she were at work, she would ask Felix to let her pause for a drink of water, and of course he would.

You see pictures, I believe, the doctor prompts. I believe you noted that on the forms?

Sort of see, actually.

What are these pictures of?

Just normal things, she says.

But then—for an instant she sees the two sweating, stumbling guards and the man swinging from the pole between them, trailing blood. Or of things that could be, she clarifies, things that could be happening. Or that could happen sometime, did happen maybe. Or maybe not. Something in the woods. Or a garden...just anything, anywhere...

The doctor waits, but that's the best she can do.

And words sometimes seem... he reads from the form—*sometimes seem like*—what does it say here? Twins? He looks at her, eyebrows raised. She feels herself blushing. Maybe not twins, exactly, she says. It's like a word has the same word inside it, but the one inside's a lot bigger, and with better colors and more parts. And the inside word is sort of vibrating, jostling around, trying to get out of its wrapper? So there's sort of a halo. Or a floppy margin.

The doctor clears his throat.

All right, he says after a moment. And when do these episodes occur? What precipitates them?

Back home they thought it was something in the air. Particulate matter, she says, pleased with the nice sound. But the mask didn't seem to help, even when they changed me from the plant to the warehouse.

Not what causes them, he says—that's what we're here to find out. I meant, how do these episodes begin?

Well, they don't actually...begin, exactly. It's more as if they're just sort of happening...

Porous outline? He asks.

Porous outline? She says.

She glances back at the forms on the screen for some help, but it's just the forms, the way she filled them out, with the answers she

checked and a few little notes where she keyed in extra information they asked for. "Dizzy," it says. "Confusion."

And there are her initials too, her initials on all the forms. It's as if she's in a mirror, staring back at herself—the initials seem more real than she does.

Well, sure. She brought those initials here, but now those initials have got her hooked up to a machine!

The doctor looks down at his folded hands, waiting.

TESTS

The hours at the clinic pass slowly, they do. The smells of antiseptics and filth. They have Therese ingest a dye, so they can observe its route as it slithers through the nooks and crannies of her brain. Needles draw fluids from her into tubes, nurses seal the tubes and put the sealed tubes into a special cupboard with flashing red lights. Other needles inject fluids into her. She waits in a waiting room. She waits in another waiting room.

Has she ever had hallucinations?

No, never.

But she sees pictures, she told the doctor, didn't she?

It's just sort of...pictures—not hallucinations! she's already said.

Over and over.

They roll her into a metal cylinder that explores things beneath her skin. In other rooms, technicians monitor screens. A message is transmitted to her every five minutes: you're doing fine, the electronic voice says.

CONSULTATION

The doctor paces as he explains. His hands are behind his back: We have not yet fully ascertained the etiology of your affliction, nor have we been entirely successful thus far in isolating the full play of its tendencies. The likelihood of a culpable pathogen has almost certainly been eliminated. There is, however, a consistent constellation of characteristics—a profile, if you will—to which the manifestations of this hyperassociative state can be said to conform, though I'm happy to say that our readings indicate a low correlation with the worrisome

Malfeasance Index that is frequently one of its most striking features.

Naturally, the overwhelming bulk of the literature on the subject treats the syndrome—this susceptibility to irrelevant, excess, or ambiguous substance—as an imbalance of some sort, a deficiency. It has been thought, variously, to be hormonal in origin, to disclose a congenital flaw in circuitry, to reflect a failure of character, to suggest a proto-psychotic vulnerability, to indicate a degradation of autoimmune-system defenses, to express the curse of Satan or conversely to express the gift of holiness, to result from a regional diet stripped of certain nutrients or from any of a number of viruses contracted in childhood. We at the clinic regard it strictly as a physiological phenomenon, a sort of synaptic leakage, so to speak, and thus pristine, free of the moral stigma it otherwise often carries.

Our primary objective here, in addition to research, of course, is to help to relieve the patient. This entails, as you and I have discussed, a strong motivation on the patient's part to pursue the goal of restored health, which in turn rests on the degree of the subject's willingness to participate in his or her own cure.

The doctor returns to his desk as he talks and shuffles through some papers.

How long do you think I'll need to stay? She asks after a few moments.

He looks up, apparently surprised to see her sitting there.

Well, as I say, young lady, that depends largely on you.

REST

It's a bit chilly, and the blanket isn't really warm enough. She wraps herself up in it. She's tired from her day of tests, and they've told her to sleep, because there will be more tomorrow, bright and early. But instead, she takes her book from the drawer, where it's been sitting, next to the box that once held the sandwich and apple, under her soft, folded satchel and her good dress.

She probably isn't supposed to have it? But they haven't said that, exactly—there's no rule. And she didn't ask. Though they did say that, for her own sake, she should try to refrain from brooding on things. Not only is it tiring, it could adversely skew the test results as well.

She opens the book, just to admire again the lovely, thick, rough-

edged paper, but then the air starts to shimmer, and it splinters, splashing words and pictures everywhere, all whirling and glittering.

She grabs up her pen: *wooden table dim cozy place. Funny song about mouse, hands clapping in time. Leaves dripping, fresh!—horse and buggy?? Buggy?? Blossoms, hooves. Glass mountain, meadow mountain tiny white flowers tiny yellow star-flowers tiny pearl moon. Clothes whisper night fields moon whispers—sailing moon, sorcerer moon, watchman moon. Marching band—shiny octopus-instruments—light or words? Long robes little outdoor tables little glass cups, stars, moon...*

The pictures flow by, sparkling, dissolving, blending in their disorder, like the landscape outside the window of the train, fading finally.

She blinks, and looks around at the stillness of the room, the mute shutters.

Right. Back in the drawer goes the book. Maybe these pictures are memories that somehow became detached from other people and stray through the universe, slipping through rips in the fabric and clinging to whatever living beings they can, faulty beings like her...

She draws the blanket more tightly around herself and snuggles into the thin pillow.

Noisy outside tonight though. All that loud banging!

CLINIC LIFE

They fit a metal helmet onto her, and the procedure room darkens for a moment. Or that's what Therese thinks when she wakes up with a dull ache in her head. In fact, they tell her, it's hours later.

They work with her, one on one. A kind tech has been trying hard to help her with word-stabilization. Did you ever collect butterflies when you were a child, Therese? The tech asks.

Butterflies? Therese says.

With pins? the tech says. And chloroform?

After certain tests or procedures, she's wheeled out into a darkened room. Sometimes there are a few other patients lying on gurneys, swaddled in white like her, and she comes back to herself in a sort of forest of soft groans and murmurs, faint, senseless fragments of speech.

The other day, she turned out to be one of the people she was hearing. Funny! Except she was saying she wanted to go home. She hopes that didn't hurt anyone's feelings!

They pretty much keep the patients apart, but she begins to recognize a few of the others, just flickering past in the corner of her eye—in the corridors or a waiting room, or even sitting in the canteen. Sometimes in the woozy twilight of one of the recovery rooms.

There's a skinny, stringy girl about her age, with chopped-off dirty-blond hair, who sends off a blizzard of quiet curses as she wakes, and a very large, very old woman, maybe fifty or so, who twists and flops on the gurney under her little sheet. Once, she gets up and totters around like a big crazy giant, shrieking until she's subdued.

Therese comes face to face with her in a waiting room. They're both wearing the white paper robes that make them look, frankly, like lab rats. The woman stares at her with vacant, blazing eyes. *You!* she says, and *you* sears a path through the air, trailing ash, before a nurse appears to lead the woman away.

TREATMENT

The drugs have started—she's doing better on the tests!

Tree, the doctor says.

She shuts her eyes and breathes deeply.

Take your time, the doctor says soothingly. Tree...

She gathers all her powers of concentration. Tree...., she says, hesitantly.

Good! the doctor says, looking up from the dials, excellent. He pats her shoulder. Tired? You've been working hard.

His approval emboldens Therese to speak. She *has* been working hard, she concedes. And all that loud banging at night keeps her up sometimes.

Ah, yes, the fireworks, the doctor says. He smiles—she's sure of it—and she's ashamed to have complained.

National holiday season, he adds, and pats her shoulder again.

THE DOCTOR REFLECTS

A taxing week, but one with its rewards. Patient T716-05 is showing great improvement. She's a touching little thing—limited comprehension, but eager to cooperate.

It's gratifying to think of the strides she's made with the help of treatment—he's looking forward to writing this up! It was only about a month ago, after all, that her responses in the Verbal Identification tests indicated apparently almost hopeless ideation-capacity. He shakes his head, recalling: "Piano" for "Tree!"

Any answer is valid, of course. In fact, there is a certain proportion of the population with very slight surplus-associative disorders who will respond quite spontaneously to "tree" with "leaf" or "branch." Even "bark"—even "trunk"—yes, even trunk. But such responses are considered to be within the periphery; such individuals are generally classified as "normal."

"Piano," however—clearly extrapolated from wood (itself an outersphere coordinate: tree>wood>piano)—is far beyond the scope of what can be regarded as healthy.

Failure to recognize the confines of words (*words*, the *building blocks of achievement*, to quote from his recent article on the subject in *Neural Function Today*) indicates an underlying degradation of those node clusters that enable the brain to comprehend the world in which its proprietor organism finds itself, and puts that organism at risk of potentially dangerous misinterpretation of data.

What if—for example—an organism were to identify a large obstacle in front of it as (for example) the "foot" of an immense tree rather than, correctly, as the *foot* of a giant prehistoric animal? Consider the possible consequences!

There is, however, a strain of current thinking in the field that categorizes those rare individuals subject to pronounced hyperassociative disorders as in some way viable: Visionaries of the Banal, as one pretentious colleague's paper on the subject styled it. (The fellow won some sort of prize for that bit of foolishness, the doctor recalls.)

In any event, it has been demonstrated that productive work can often be found for such individuals—for instance, in the field of branding.

The doctor, alone in his office, chuckles (somewhat self-consciously) at the thought of a former patient, whose bizarre (though, fortunately, curable) conviction that thousands of people were being shot as they returned to their homes at night and stood fiddling with their keys at their doors, turned out to be linked to his extraordinary (and ultimately very well-remunerated) ability to think up names for paint colors.

(Giant prehistoric animal possibly poor example, unconvincing, revise? Ha ha, maybe he should take a couple of those fuzz-offs himself!)

SUNDAY

Therese wakes just before dawn, gasping for breath in the gray glass-dust mist between sleeping and waking, surrounded by a static of phantoms. Can she manage to put some of them into her book? She starts to open the drawer where it is, but the whispering and flimmering is already winking out around her.

Just as well—she has been making high scores on the tests; she doesn't risk a relapse. She closes the drawer firmly and walks back and forth in her room to shake off the phantom remnants.

The noise of the night's fireworks is still in her ears. The moon is there or not there, behind the metal shutters.

They've *strongly suggested* that she rest today. And that's just what she plans to do. She's calm enough now to fall back asleep, she thinks, and when she wakes up in the true day, she'll be careful to take it easy. Maybe just lie around and play some games.

She still hasn't seen any of the City though—*what* will she tell her friends at home?

Oh, but she knows how it looks out there, they all know how it looks, beyond the hospital complex, out on the broad avenues...

The peeling of the bells comes faintly through the metal shutters, and when she closes her eyes, she sees the sun shining, shining, a gold veil in the air, and gold reflecting over the entire glorious city from the Tower at its summit.

Streams of people, their arms laden with aromatic leaves and sprays of flowers, are coming from all the great houses; processions pour through the boulevards to worship. The women are so beautiful—their wrists flash with jewels, and their legs gleam. Their long, pale hair flows down their backs.

At home, her friends bow their heads and kneel. Julia has put a pretty Sunday ribbon in her black curls. Therese thinks: we are grateful.

Later today, the others will take their weekly salaries to the Mall, as they do every Sunday. Earrings, nail polish, maybe a new game, a T-shirt, some candy... what would she get if she could be with them?

Tomorrow, a new week will begin, with more tests. And they say they'll be able to measure exactly how well the drugs are working.

Therese opens the drawer in her table and surveys the tidy stack of her possessions. She tucks her book away on the bottom.

A little dry crumb clings to the cardboard box. Do her friends at home still remember her?

She unfolds her good dress, smoothing the soft fabric and admiring the sweet flowers printed on it. She puts it on and lies down again, falling toward sleep.

Yes, she can hear the doctor's voice. Tree, he says.

Tree, she says, and a peaceful sensation radiates through her, as the word locks down.

But then for a moment she feels her unruly heart, her skin, her neurons—the secret language of her body—sending evidence of treachery to the sensors and dials. All around her, behind the wall of locked words, hums the vast, intractable, concealed conversation.

Coin, the doctor says.

She closes her ears and strains to shut out the noise.

Coin, she says. Tears of effort cloud her eyes.

Good, says the doctor—mirror. His voice is growing softer and more insistent.

Mirror, she says—and her voice, too, is low and urgent.

Tower, the doctor says.

She takes a deep breath. Tower, she says

Fireworks, the doctor says.

In her sleep, she struggles to scream, but she cannot make a sound.

Let's try that one again, please, the doctor says: fireworks.

Fireworks, she says...

Moon, the doctor says...