

Is This Your Day To Join the Revolution?

by Genevieve Valentine

When Liz left her building, Disease Control workers were standing on the corners, handing out pills and little paper cups of Coke.

“Do you need one?” the old lady asked, holding up a handful of paper masks stamped with ads for Lavender Fields Sterile-Milled Soap. Liz pulled out the one she kept in her bag, and the lady smiled.

The TV in her subway car showed “What You Can Do on a Date.” The young man and woman went to the fair twice – once where he screwed everything up, and again where he helped her into the Ferris Wheel and handed her a paper mask before he put on his own.

The movie closed with swelling music and a reminder in cursive: ARE YOU DUE FOR A DATE? CHECK WITH YOUR DOCTOR.

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Liz worked the reception desk on the sixth floor of the Department of Information Affairs.

“That Greg’s a lucky man,” said Mr. Randall, the District Manager, when he came in every morning. “Too bad I didn’t get matched with you first!”

Liz chuckled, because a District Manager’s jokes were always funny.

Above her, on a loop, the introduction video played for anyone coming into the Department. It showed a woman on the street overhearing pieces of information she didn’t know how to report; it reviewed the details of filing a claim as a man in a mechanic’s jumpsuit signed in at the desk, took the elevator to the eighteenth floor, shook hands with a smiling agent.

“What do *you* know that *we* should know?” the narrator asked at the end, right before the two actors turned to the camera and the man in the jumpsuit said, “More than I thought, that’s for sure!”

Liz couldn’t see it from where she was sitting, but she didn’t need to. She’d seen the film during orientation; the last time anyone at the Department suggested she had anything anyone needed to know.

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Greg waited outside her building for their scheduled date, and when he saw her coming, he smiled.

Greg had been studying for a job at Disease Control, before the Bang. His viable sperm knocked him out of line for any Sector-C jobs; he answered phones at a law office. They had been matched three years ago, and had been evaluated “Above Average” Sweethearts

three years running by the Society Council. Their chances of marriage had been rated by the doctors as close to 80%.

Greg was gay as a Maypole, but they made do.

When she was just far enough away, she called, "Hello, darling." (You never knew when the Society Council was monitoring.)

He smiled. "Hello, honey. How was your day?"

"Some concern over Disease, I think. Someone from Film Production signed in this morning; they might be making a new film about how the Disease is going."

Greg whistled. "That's no good."

She shook her head. "I just don't understand the delay – we've been wearing the masks for weeks already, they should have delivered a new movie by now."

"They should have," Greg said, frowning.

Liz patted her boyfriend's arm and dropped the subject; every once in a while, the government wasn't above a little mistake.

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They hit up *The Shindig* at the Three-Screen. The tag line had caused a little scandal ("Vane and Murray spark more fireworks than the Bang!"), but it was just a romantic musical. Liz liked the dancing. Greg liked Joe Murray.

The cashier stamped their tickets. "Please don't forget to get them stamped on the way out or the purchase is ineligible for reimbursement from the Department of Society," he droned.

Once they were in their seats, Greg put his arm around her like all the other guys had done to their dates. (You never knew who was a Society Council inspector.) "Is there a plan for after this?"

"Well, if you really enjoy Joe Murray, we can go to a Society hotel if you want, after."

He looked over, understanding. "Due for the doctor?"

She smiled thinly. "We have a year left before they re-match me." She thought about Mr. Randall finding out and filing a request, and shuddered. "I'd rather stick it out with you."

Greg nodded, and when the movie titles came up, he held her hand.

Murray and Vane were in the middle of their meet-cute dance routine when the film stuttered, pixelated, and blinked out.

"Refund!" someone shouted before the screen was even black.

The screen flared back to life, with the title: YOU ARE BEING LIED TO.

"So, no refund?" asked Greg. The people near them laughed.

The screen cards kept flashing. THERE ARE NO PATHOGENS. THERE IS NO DISEASE CONTROL.

THERE IS NO DISEASE.

Now no one was laughing.

Someone got up and ran out of the theatre.

Liz craned her neck, trying to see what was happening in the projection booth.

The screen cut to a grainy shot of a computer screen; a shadowy figure sat beside it, typing and talking to the camera.

“We are John Doe,” it said – its voice had been distorted, like film played at half-speed – “and we have tuned the network. We have proof the Disease is a lie.”

Now people were beginning to murmur. Some got up and scurried for the exit like it was a Security Department trap. It probably was.

Liz hoped this kid was lying. She thought, annoyed, about the stupid paper mask she wore three days a week when the Pathogen Alert was high.

The computer screen showed a mail exchange with the header DAMAGE CONTROL TO INTERCEPT INFORMATION LEAK.

“Every citizen MUST ACT,” the voice was saying. “Don’t take the pills from Disease Control!”

By now the figure was agitated, gesturing at the camera. “Ask yourselves: who’s ever really gotten sick? How can the Bang’s pathogens strike such small areas? Why are they always near the borders? How does Disease Control respond so quickly? The pills have kept us docile, but the time has come to act! We’ve made contact with -”

The doors behind them crashed open, the doorway filled with plainclothes SD and uniformed cops, guns out.

“Hold it!” someone shouted, and the police charged the projector booth.

A young man jumped out of the booth and crash-landed in the aisle, grabbing Greg’s seat to pull himself up – the boy was young, blond, his face tight with pain or fear, and for a moment he was just staring at them, his hands flexed on Greg’s armrest.

Then he sprinted for the exit and disappeared.

The cops and SDs tripped over themselves back down the projection-room stairs, and they scattered – some for the exits, some for the audience.

Greg and Liz were yanked out of their seats and dragged outside into a holding pen of cop cars, along with the rest of the audience. Liz saw a few of the ones who had tried to run and hadn’t made it.

“I don’t want to go into the station,” Greg told her. “It could end up on my record.”

He still hoped that someday he could get closer – any closer – to Disease Control.

Liz faked a storm of tears when the cops were close enough to see it, and they handed Greg a printout and stamped his ticket stubs and told him to be a gentleman and take her home, already.

“I’m looking for a refund for this prank,” Greg told them half-seriously, “I want you to know that.”

On the walk home, Greg read from the printout; a standard-issue distribution, without a date on it. They’d had it ready to go, just in case.

Greg flashed the picture of a frowning boy dragging a skull-emblazoned bag behind him.

Pranks are FOOLISH and WASTE THE TIME of VALUABLE CITIZENS. They DISTRACT from safety work and INTERFERE with your government. If you see a PRANKSTER, contact your local precinct.

The bottom read, in large block letters, *TODAY’S DELINQUENT IS TOMORROW’S CRIMINAL.*

“Hold it,” said the blond kid from behind her, and Liz felt the point of a knife in her back.

“Or today’s criminal,” Liz said.

Greg leveled a look at the kid. “Keep it cool, Johnny Doe. What do you want?”

“Your car.”

“Don’t have one.”

Johnny pulled a face. “Shit. Well. Give me your money,” he said, and nudged Liz with his shoulder (not, she noted, with the knife).

“What, you’re going to buy a bus pass and ride out of town on the local?” Liz asked, but she handed over her purse. “Seventeen dollars. Enjoy.”

Johnny thumbed through the wallet with his free hand. “They’ve got my car,” he told them like they were all friends. “I need to get out of here. They’ll kill me.”

Liz didn’t doubt that.

Greg glanced around at the quiet street. Ahead of them was the main drag, swarming with people going out to the City Fair on subsidized dates.

“You should go,” said Johnny. “You’ll be in trouble if they see you with me.”

Greg looked like he was in the middle of a magnificent adventure, and was sneaking looks at Johnny’s sharp profile when he thought Johnny wasn’t looking, and Liz knew what was coming before Greg even opened his mouth.

Greg asked, “What do you need?”

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Liz and Greg signed into a Society hotel just off the main drag. The concierge registered them, stamped their paper, and smiled politely. No speeches about exit stamps this time – it was gauche for concierges to keep track of that sort of thing.

They closed the door and looked at one another like it was their first date again. Liz felt an itch just under her skin, like she was sick, like she needed to run until she dropped. She felt like Greg looked.

Greg laid his tie over the chair and looked at her. “What if they trace him to my apartment? What if they find him there?”

Liz figured if they found a good-looking young man in Greg’s apartment, he’d be in trouble for a lot more than harboring a fugitive.

“Come on,” said Liz, tugging gently at the tongue of his belt. “We have work to do. Just close your eyes and think of Johnny.”

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At the door of the hotel, Greg kissed her cheek goodnight. He seemed surprised when she fell into step beside him instead of turning for her street, but he took her arm without hesitation.

“Just curious to see what he does in civilization,” she said when she felt him looking at her. “Besides, I’m your alibi if anyone’s found him.”

“God, that’s the truth,” he said, and pressed her hand more tightly into the crook of his arm.

John Doe was gone, having availed himself of Greg’s good raincoat and a bottle of milk from the refrigerator, and Greg’s sadness at the end of their adventure was mitigated by the fact that he’d have to replace a very pricey coat.

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Liz figured that wasn’t the last of Johnny Doe, though when Greg wistfully asked her, “Do you think he might ever...?” she said, “Nope,” just to keep him from getting tied up in knots about it.

Secretly, she guessed that a rebel wouldn’t abandon a safe harbor, but that was really only from the films (“Is Your Neighbor a Traitor?”) and she couldn’t be sure, now.

Sometimes when they were at the movies and the screen skipped a frame, Greg tensed, and Liz dreaded the day Johnny ever came back and swept Greg off his feet and into some mission, living in a ghost town smack in the middle of the Pathogen Fields.

Liz would have to go on the group dates in the Society Center where they observed you behind the mirror and marked your body language and assigned you someone, and Liz would have to learn to live with someone entirely new.

Above her head, the woman in the video was shopping for groceries. A man behind her said to someone, “We’ll have to hurry, the pickup happens tonight,” and the woman frowned at an apple; the narrator said, “Mary knows something’s not quite right, but what can she do? She can do what we ALL should do: report suspicions. Today’s alert citizen is tomorrow’s hero.”

On the screen behind her, the man in the jumpsuit opened the lobby door and approached the desk to make his complaint. (He never actually made it, Liz knew; he just went up in the elevator and shook hands with the other actor, every ten minutes, all day.)

“It’s easy to be a good citizen!” the narrator said. “We need what you know.”

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John Doe was standing at the corner of her street, dressed like a Disease Control agent, when she saw him next.

When he saw her, he went white as a sheet. Then he fumbled for the tray, handed her a cup.

“What’s in here?” she asked under her breath. “You poisoning us now?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s the same as the rest,” he said. “I’m just waiting here to be taken back to Disease Control.”

So he was going to sneak in that way.

“Is it true you work for the DOI?”

She blinked as his question settled in. Then she shook her head. “Oh, no, Johnny. Don’t.”

“How can you say no?” he handed off a paper cup to a passerby, turned back to her. This close, she could see the vein of green in his blue eyes.

“You’re not stupid,” he said. “You know I’m telling the truth. Won’t you help me?”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m getting into Disease Control,” he said. “I’m getting proof that this is all just to keep us in line, and I’m going to air it across the country. People are going to have a nasty wake-up.”

She wondered how he planned to organize the nation full of people he was going to wake up. “I can’t help you,” she said.

“I know where you work,” he said, pleading. “You can help me get the message out. All you have to do is let me in. I’ll go upstairs on my own, I can get the message out from there.”

She took a step back. “I can’t,” she said. “It’s too dangerous.”

“No one will know it was you.”

That much she knew for sure – she said, “Someone will.”

“How can you be such a coward?” He was louder now – too loud, the other Disease Control agent looked concerned – and Liz took a step back as Johnny stepped forward. His eyes were sharp and bright. “Don’t you see what they’ve done to you?”

“Leave me alone,” she said. She wished Greg or someone was here, just in case.

He dropped the tray with a clang; paper cups and pills skittered across the pavement, bounced off Liz’s shoes.

“It’s over,” he said. “They’ll kill me if you don’t help me. You’ve killed me.”

Liz couldn’t breathe. She felt dizzy. She didn’t understand what he meant.

The next moment she was on the ground, being handcuffed, and Johnny was being picked up (five cops, maybe more) and carried, kicking, into the back of a van that had appeared out of nowhere.

As the two policemen walked Liz to the car, they passed the van, blaring the last swells of a familiar tune through its speakers.

“Are you due for a date?” called the announcer. “Check with your doctor.”

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Mr. Randall was waiting for her on the eighteenth floor of the Department.

She waited. She tried to think how many people who came up to report something to the Department had ever come down again.

“We’d like to congratulate you,” said Mr. Randall.

Liz blinked. “Pardon?”

“Your John Doe was part of a series of test runs we did around the city to gauge the audience for a new instructional film. Marketing has been working with us for months.”

Relief flooded her. “Oh, I see,” she said.

“Our field man did his damndest, but I told him – I said, That girl has her head on straight, you won’t get her to help you! He tried twice, the theatre and the street, but did Elizabeth fold?” He laughed. “I told him he’d have as much luck getting help from me as from you.”

She thought about giving Johnny her keys to Greg’s place, telling him the fastest way to get there, taking Greg’s arm to go for an alibi date.

No one had told Randall about that. This was no undercover job, then; Johnny Doe had died and taken that secret with him.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

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When she got back to her desk, she called Greg. “Want to get married?”

He only hesitated a moment. “I thought you’d never ask,” he said, a little too brightly, but only just. “I’ll pick you up tonight and we’ll go to City Hall and your doctor.”

She wanted to tell Greg what had happened; how she had been too afraid to help Johnny, and what must have happened to him by now.

“See you soon,” she said, hung up as he was saying, “Goodbye, darling.”

Above her, the film was ending, the Department actor grinning through the last frames of twinkling music.

“What do *you* know that *we* should know?”