

Searching

By Eva Colás

It's when I fall asleep in the empty bathtub naked that I know I'm in trouble, and I'm not even the sick one, Jamie is.

"It's chronic," she told me. I don't even know what that means. When my mom heard about Jamie getting sick and saw how sad I was, she said, "It's like Daddy's diabetes. He's fine as long as he takes that shot, right? Well Jamie will be fine as long as she takes care of herself."

I thought, *if it's like diabetes, why is her dad crying so much?* But I didn't say that.

I am asking Jamie questions.

"Is it contagious?"

"Not unless I bleed all over you or we fuck."

I make a grossed out face and play like I'm scared of her germs, because I know it will make her laugh. She does and I say,

"Then how'd you get it?"

"A needle."

"You don't do that..."

"Not for heroin. God you are so stupid. I was at the *doctor* and it was a dirty needle."

"You're suing them, right?"

"Of course, stupid."

"Are you gonna lose all your hair?"

"What? No, stupid."

I get serious.

"Are you gonna die?"

She doesn't answer, just leans forward and wraps her arms around my neck. She doesn't make a sound when she cries, so I can't tell that she is until I feel my shirt get all soggy.

I do research for her, and for me. Google is no help. When I type in “aid” it gives me Financial Aids!!! and I know that’s not what she needs. When I type in “doctor dirty needles” I get a website about some kid getting stabbed with a heroin addict’s syringe. When I type in “Jamie’s sickness” I get MySpace pages.

Then I remember, and I type “HIV/AIDS” and get results.

I go to her the next day and spout off my brand new knowledge, using big words like “Immunodeficiency.” I know she’s impressed, and she smiles so only her first four teeth show, which I love. She says, “That must be the first time you ever did research,” and I go, “You’re no history project.”

I don’t think it makes much sense, but she grins with all her teeth and hugs me. She’s been doing that a lot lately. Hugging me, I mean. I don’t mind. I just feel bad.

Google has become my guide. I figured Jamie was getting real tired of my asking questions all the time, plus her dad always looked at me when I was over like he wished I were gone so he could spend his time with her. He’s always asking me if I have a ride home, and also how my parents are. I don’t think they’re related. I always walk home. Google says it’s good for you.

Google also says that I should be there for her and sometimes send her cards that just say “I care.” Instead I print out papers for her about how she might be feeling, and when I show them to her she goes,

“Will...” all choky, and then rips them up and says, “The only thing I need is you,” and it’s cheesy and that makes my face turn all red so instead I just say,

“You just wasted like, 12 trees,” and play like I’m mad and she laughs and laughs and I know that the day it’s really bad is the day I can’t make her laugh anymore.

When school starts, I go to pick her up so we can walk. We have to leave extra early so we have enough time, but it’s worth it because it’s hardly even light out while we’re moving and our breath shows up in the air and we can just talk before being stuck in wooden chairs for seven hours.

This morning I heard her say to her dad, “Why did I have to get the disease that doesn’t get me out of *school*?” She rolls her eyes and he laughs but you can tell he

doesn't think it's funny—he has to think about the laugh first. Her backpack has Pokémon on it.

“You like?” she asks.

“Word,” I go, because it makes her laugh when I talk like that

During health fifth hour, a lady comes in to talk about AIDS. This kid who sits behind me and two seats to the left whispers loud to this other kid, “The faggot disease!” They crack up and I don't even think before I'm standing up and walking without feeling it and hitting that kid in the face harder than anything I ever hit in my whole goddam life.

In the office I don't tell them why I hit him.

“Did he say something to provoke you?”

Silence.

“Do you just not like him?”

Silence.

“If you don't tell us what happened, we can't judge your punishment accurately.”

“Whatever,” I go, and then I'm suspended so I don't have to go to school, which is almost ironic because I'm not even the one with the disease, Jamie is, and she's stuck in school.

When they tell my mom, she asks me, “Why did you fight that boy?”

I say, “He called you a whore” because I know it'll shock her and make her shut up. It does, and she says, “Watch it!” and leaves me alone.

I don't want to tell Jamie why I hit the kid because I know it'll make her cry like most things have lately, but she gets me to tell her and she does start crying.

I say, “Don't worry, the kid's an idiot anyway.”

She says, “I don't care what he said. I just wish you'd stop getting in trouble because of me.”

This time she doesn't hug me, just curls her legs up to her chest and wraps her arms around them with her face all in her knees.

We are having a staring contest.

Jamie blinks first and doesn't open her eyes for a whole minute.

Jamie and I are coloring in her bedroom. We tried to go to the giant rock in her backyard, but her dad wouldn't let us. "It's not safe," he said. "Think about all the germs outside." Jamie argued.

"It's 60 degrees outside. I'm not going to eat dirt or something, and who gets sick in the *summer*?" But he said "Absolutely not." and I thought, *aren't you already sick?* But I didn't say that, instead I just followed her as she stomped up to her room. When she got up the stairs she was a little out of breath, and that worried me. But I stuck quiet.

It's only when we're drawing dinosaurs and monsters with 64-box crayons that I say casually, "Not feeling good?" and I keep coloring the sky so she thinks I'm just curious.

"I hate it," she says. A tear stains the flower she's coloring, and she takes the crayon and scribbles the whole page red, and then she rips it up and throws it at me.

"Now you have AIDS, too," she goes.

I am researching on Google, which is the only way I can get information anymore considering I'm practically banned from school. Here's what I know:

--Needles are disposable.

--Doctors keep rubber gloves on top of a little trashcan-looking thing on the wall.

--The trashcan thing is filled with needles that have been used.

What I don't get is, if the used ones and the new ones each have different homes, how do you just *accidentally* use the wrong one?

When her dad is at work we sneak out to Dairy Queen. We used to go every day after school, before she got sick. We'd go and we'd get a big Oreo and Butterfinger milkshake. We share curly straws. She would pick out the Oreos, and I would pick out the Butterfingers. Then the milkshake would be all melty when we were done with the candy pieces and we'd drink it up while we walked home.

Today is different. We get a milkshake and when she eats an Oreo and I go for a Butterfinger she stops me and says,

“What if I have a cut on my finger?”

The look on her face makes my stomach twist up like when you’re little and you’re scared of monsters.

“Don’t you get it? I *want* it. If you have it, I want it too,” I say, and I mean it. She leans across the table and kisses my mouth. Her lips are sticky. She smells like Oreo and strawberry lip-gloss.

She sits down, and says, “If you get it, I won’t be your friend anymore” and she throws up all over the bench and passes out.

I don’t even care that I’m sitting in her puke, I’m right next to her holding her hand and trying to sit her up while the dumb girl behind the DQ window waits for good reception on her cell phone. I’m holding her hand when the ambulance gets there and puts her on that cot with wheels and I only let go when they pry our sticky, milkshaked hands apart and start asking me questions.

“It wasn’t the ice cream.”

That’s the first thing the doctor says to me and her dad when we’re sitting in chairs that look like they got thrown up on 11 times and then left to rot. It doesn’t seem very clean. Then I remember the whole reason I’m in a stupid hospital is because doctors don’t know how to keep anything clean. Then I start to wonder.

“You know how HIV and AIDS operate, correct?” he’s asking Jamie’s dad. I wonder: how do you get to be a doctor?

“Yes, Doctor,” her dad answers. He doesn’t even notice or care that the doctor is talking to him the way he’d talk to me, like a crazy kid fool who doesn’t know the difference between stop and go.

I wonder: how can her dad trust these people when they’re the reason she’s here in the first place?

“Well, a small bacteria has invaded your daughter’s body.”

That sounds bad. I wonder: Could she have gotten it from kissing me those two seconds?

I wonder: Why does everything have to be so complicated?

“Due to the lack of immune strength that AIDS causes, her body has much more trouble fighting this bacteria. That’s what causes fatalities in AIDS patients—even a common cold can be deadly.”

I wonder: Why did I let her play outside with me?

“Luckily she’s in a clean, safe environment now. We are keeping her isolated and sedated to try and avoid any possible foreign bacteria. For now, it’s best that you don’t see her. What is clean air to you could be potentially deadly to her.”

I wonder: How do you deal with some man telling you that you could kill your daughter by breathing?

I hold my breath. Quiet, so no one notices.

I wonder: How do you let a germ take over your body?

I wonder: How could I let germs take over her body?

I wonder: What have I done?

I think: Fuck Google for not teaching me better.

My heart starts beating in my head and I take a deep breath and it doesn’t feel fair. We see her through this window and she’s hooked up to some machine and she looks so small, smaller than a baby or a kitten or even an amoeba, which we learned about last year before she got sick. I wish she could divide herself in half, only one half would be healthy. Then she could regrow as a whole healthy person and we would all be okay.

Instead her dad and me are just looking at her. She’s paler than a ghost that’s invisible, weak like even resting her head on a pillow is taking up lots of her energy. I want to lie on a pillow. I want to rest my head. It’s not fair that resting my head won’t make me tired. I hold my breath again. When Jamie’s dad touches my shoulder, I know it’s time to go, and I let the air out of my mouth slower than a snail. It’s not fair that I can do that and Jamie can’t, not without a dumb machine making her air cleaner.

Jamie’s dad is taking me home.

“It’s my fault,” I say.

“I made her go outside. I kept telling her it was okay and taking her places and stuff,” I say.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and I’ve never meant anything more. I can feel it.

It's my fault, I want to say again.

I should have paid more attention on Google, I want to say.

I shouldn't have thought about myself, I want to say.

I want to say I'm sorry, but it's like my mouth is glued shut and my words are stuck in my voice box. Then I start to imagine what a voice box looks like. How it's just a metallic box in your throat with red buttons on it and words trapped in it and wires. Then I imagine how Jamie is all attached to one of those through her nose and her mouth and I want to throw up, only my mouth is still glued shut.

The car stops by a curb and then he's moving the shifter and pulling up the stick break and turning to face me. He raises his arms and I think, *now he's going to hit me. Well, I deserve it.* But I still wince a little bit, and I'm wishing I hadn't, especially since I deserve it. Only he doesn't hit me. Instead he grabs his hair and he throws his head against the steering wheel and the car alarm starts screeching and he's crying real loud and sobbing harder than I ever heard even a new baby cry. Then he's turning to me and wrapping me in this giant hug and saying something I can't hear over the alarm, until the noises start to separate and he's going, "It's not your fault, it's not your fault" over and over and over and for the first time since before I even heard she was sick I'm crying real loud and hard and I can't make it stop. I am so scared.

"It's not your fault, Will. It's not your fault."

I'm just crying and crying.

On some movie once, I heard someone say, "No one is an atheist in a foxhole" and I looked up what *atheist* and *foxhole* mean and the sentence makes a lot of sense.

That's why I started praying for Jamie. Not to God. I don't believe in God. I pray to the air and to the stars and to the clouds and the buildings and cells and atoms and molecules and dividing amoebas and hair follicles that can she please, please, *please* be okay, *please*, I'm sorry, I'll do anything, I love her more than the whole world plus the moon, sun and eight other planets including Pluto and black holes and all the stars, please, please, please. I do it so much I can hardly stop. Pretty soon when I'm eating Lucky Charms and washing the dishes I'm whispering "*Pleasepleaseplease*" without realizing it. I do it when I'm reading, when I shovel snow off the ground. I make a

snowman and draw “please” all over its stomach until I can’t feel my finger and it’s red like a balloon. I write it in the air and on paper in her favorite colors and I draw her pictures for when they’ll finally let me in the room to see her.

I can’t wait to see her.

They let her dad go in first, which makes sense. I watch through the window and then just close my eyes and sink to the floor with my back against the wall and I’m not thinking *please*, I’m thinking, *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

Her heart monitor is jagged.

When it’s my turn her dad touches my shoulder real light and looks at her one last time before letting me talk to her. It doesn’t feel like really talking to her. She’s asleep or passed out or something. I imagine taking all the machines and ripping them out and her eyes opening and us running away to a plane, because I’ve never been on a plane and she says I would love it. But I don’t, instead I just walk over to her real quiet and sit on this pukey chair next to her bed and her eyes are fluttering like they do when she’s sleeping and I think, *You blinked*, and I say, real quiet, “You blinked.”

And I say it again, like an echo.

“You blinked.”

Quieter, so I won’t wake her.

I wish I could wake her.

I wish she were awake.

My eyes hurt from staring at her so long. She’s so pretty. I never notice it when she’s awake. How she’s so small. I remember how I used to see how many fingers I could wrap around her whole wrist. I remember how she laughed like everything was the funniest thing she’d ever heard. I don’t want to leave. I don’t even feel time passing. I can’t even pray. When I’m seeing her all knocked out in front of me, praying seems like a joke, or fake. Because she’s not waking up, and that’s real.

“Open your eyes,” I whisper. Then, louder.

“Open your eyes.”

Finally I go on repeat, louder and louder until I'm shouting
"OPEN YOUR EYES! OPEN YOUR EYES!" And I'm crying and I don't realize it and
her dad is wrapping his arms around me tight because all of a sudden I'm standing and
throwing the chair I was sitting in and her vase with flowers against the wall. I'm sobbing
and choking and praying and whispering *pleasepleaseplease* and wishing her eyes would
open. And then they do and I slip out of his grip so quick and I am in her arms and she is
so warm and everything is real when she's gripping her fingers as hard as she can into my
back in a hug that makes more sense than anything I was wondering before. Everything is
real when she's whispering, "Why are you making such a racket, stupid?" and smiling,
smiling, smiling, she is smiling at me and I am smiling at her and she is saying, "You
smell so good, Will, you smell so good," and I love her.

