

Carolyn A. Drake
Pill Pusher

Around 12:43 p.m., I realize that I have made a \$70,000 mistake.

“Ma’am,” my voice strains above the rush-hour din of the Walgreens pharmacy, my tired lips no longer capable of mimicking a faux¹-friendly customer service smile, “you have to stand over here –”

5 “I’ve been waiting for fifteen minutes!” Bug-eyed Coach sunglasses shade her from narrow eyebrow to cheek, but her impatient foot tapping has already sent the message: this is an important lady, who has fantastically important things to tend to today.

Such vital things, I think with a glance around the crowded pharmacy queue, *like grocery shopping at Whole Foods² and prepping for a PTA meeting smackdown³.*

10 “We didn’t realize you weren’t being helped,” I reply with all the patience I have left after a nonstop three-hour onslaught. *And I didn’t realize that getting a pharmacy degree would damn me to a life in retail, pushing pills for soccer moms and their ADHD-riddled children.*

15 *But that’s not all!* Billy Mays’s⁴ voice interrupts my thoughts with orgasmic enthusiasm. *You’ll also get a crushing sense of inadequacy for being a legalized drug dealer, feeding addictions for Cialis and Zoloft and Oxycodone⁵! In addition, you’ll get \$70,000 in student loans! Not to mention a 12 percent interest rate, starting six months after graduation! That’s a lifetime of unfulfillment and debt for six years of education! What a bargain!*

“Well, I’ve been *standing* here!” Bug Eyes spreads her arms wide and waves them, and I am reminded of a toddler on the threshold of a tantrum.

20 “The line is actually over there,” I point to a teenage girl with worried eyes – *Plan B or Yaz⁶*, I mentally wager – shifting from foot to foot behind a gangly young man in long sleeves and a beanie who shoots me a manic grin and waves when my eyes slide over him. *Heroin addict, will ask for diabetic needles for his “grandma”, I’ll bet ten to one he offers to get me a cup of coffee while he waits, because he’s just such a nice guy.*

Bug Eyes issues the line a dismissive glance and turns up her nose. “How am I supposed to know where the line is? You’re not doing anything, right?” She interrupts as I open my mouth to explain how lines work: “Why can’t you just grab my prescription?”

25 *Self-entitled⁷ bitch.* “I’m in the middle of something,” I hold up the hypodermic needle and flu shot vaccine bottle for the flirtatious silver-haired gentleman one of the technicians ushered to the clinical waiting room five minutes earlier, “but if you could just come over here and wait just a moment –”

“I *have* been waiting!” The woman’s voice rises over the decibel of annoyance to irrational anger. “*You* haven’t been paying attention!”

30 My eyes flicker to the group of people milling around in front of the pharmacy counter; no one makes eye contact. Customers waiting for their prescriptions pretend to check their phones while observing the exchange between irate customer and jaded millennial pharmacist from their peripheral vision. *Everyone loves a goddamned train wreck, after all.*

35 I glance around the pharmacy for assistance; the pharmacy manager is on the phone wrestling with an insurance agency over a Coumadin⁸ co-pay, and the two technicians scurry between the drive-through and the ever-ringing phone like ants shadowed by a large boot. They take no interest in the situation unraveling at the counter.

I’ll have to handle this.

¹ fake

² *Whole Foods*: exclusive supermarket

³ confrontation

⁴ *Billy Mays*: (1958-2009) American celebrity in television commercials

⁵ *Cialis, Zoloft, Oxycodone*: medication for various medical conditions

⁶ *Plan B or Yaz*: morning-after pills

⁷ (here) arrogant

⁸ medication

40 *Bloated soccer mom who consumes Lean Cuisines⁹, goes to Pilates classes, and takes placebo-effect dietary supplements because Oprah¹⁰ told her to, I diagnose. Prognosis: Incurable.*

Just get her out of here and move on to the drug addict.

My teeth clench as I swivel and slide the bottle back into the fridge, disposing of the unused needle in the Sharps bin beneath the counter before turning to Bug Eyes. “What can I get for you?”

45 Her mouth twitches in triumph, and she steps forward to thrust the blue prescription paper across the counter. I inspect the scrawled chicken scratch. Amoxicillin¹¹. Of course. *Her kid has a cold – obviously far more important than anyone else’s prescription.*

“This is for an eight-year-old?” I ask.

“Yes, my daughter.”

“She’s okay with swallowing large pills?”

50 “No, it’s supposed to be a liquid.”

“Okay, it says pills here.”

“Can you switch it?”

“I actually have to call the doctor.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

55 “Sorry, we can’t legally alter prescriptions without –”

“Oh, this is horseshit!”

Blood thumps in my ears. Everyone is staring. “Ma’am –”

“This is ridiculous! We’ve been loyal customers for years, and this has been the most *appalling* treatment!”

“Ma’am, it’s not Walgreens,” I try to explain, “it’s –” *the law*, but the words are cut off before I can finish.

60 “You know what? Fine!” she squawks, ripping her sunglasses off. Eye to eye, she fixes me with a vile glare. “Call the damn doctor! His office closes at one, so hurry it up or you’re going to miss him! And for the record, I *will* be calling corporate to lodge a complaint about your treatment of this entire situation!”

White heat sears my skin. My ears thrum. The pressure of the morning boils over.

65 “Go for it!” I roar back, slamming the prescription on the counter. “In the meantime, can I get back to my goddamn job?”

A horrified silence cuts through the murmuring store. Bug Eyes stares, jaw slack, stunned, but mercifully mute.

I swallow. “Thank you!” Without waiting for a retort, I turn my burning face away from the counter and start punching in the last name on the prescription into the computer system. My fingers shake as I struggle to type. I
70 am vaguely aware of my coworkers’ alarmed gazes and the hushed whispers between the techs, but I refuse to meet their eyes, convinced they’ll be able to see the broken thread of nerves behind my own.

Went too far, lost it, snapped, and now I’ll be fired, lose my job only two years out of school and burn the retail bridge forever. I’ll have to move out of state to find work, all because of my stupid, stupid mouth, because I couldn’t keep control.

75 *You know what? A fiercer, embittered voice snarls over the meek, panicked one in my head. GOOD. Fire me. Burn this bridge. I’ll find something, anything else. Anything is better than bottling self-help for self-pitying idiots who wouldn’t know true sickness if it crawled into their evening cocktail. So fucking go for it. Make my day, punk.*

Resolved to update my CV tonight over a glass (bottle) of wine, I open the record for Bug Eyes, searching for her doctor’s phone number. In the upper right-hand corner, however, the little yellow folder that reads NOTES
80 catches my eye.

A sudden urge for some validation in light of my unprofessional reaction grips me. Eager to see what previous pharmacists have to say about rude ol’ Bug Eyes, I click open the “comments” section of the profile.

As I scan the comments, I feel cold fingers clench around my ribcage.

85 3/13 Patient had questions about daughter’s first round of Dasatinib. Recommended talking to primary care about Zofran for the nausea.

⁹ *Lean Cuisine*: a brand of frozen low-calorie dinners

¹⁰ *Oprah Winfrey*: (b. 1954) talk-show host

¹¹ medication used to treat infections

6/13 Patient had questions about Dexamethasone side effects on daughter during treatment.

9/13 Needed to call primary care to confirm Percocet refill.

2/15 Patient's daughter recently left hospital, had questions about second round of treatment, effect on antibiotics.

90 The pharmacy, although bustling again with activity, falls silent as I absorb what I've read.

Zofran for the nausea, steroids for the bloating, Percocet for the pain...

Dasatinib. Leukemia. *Damn.*

I yank my eyes away from the computer screen, and they are drawn to the puffy-faced woman glaring at me from across the counter, indignant. I suddenly notice wrinkles well beyond those appropriate for a thirty-

95 something. She's not much older than me – maybe ten years.

Ten years ago I decided to go to school for pharmacy.

I fold the prescription and jot down the doctor's number on the back of it. He immediately clears the prescription. I type up the label, pour the amoxicillin syrup into a prescription bottle, and turn back to the counter.

100 "Here you go." The woman wordlessly grabs the bag and starts to turn, but I hold on to the bag. She turns back to me.

"Try bland white rice for nausea," I say, "in addition to the Zofran. It helped a lot with my stomach ulcer."

For a moment, her brow hardens, as if she's about to scream at me again, but then it softens for the first time. The lines around her taut mouth smooth.

105 "Thank you." Flustered, she flounders for a beat before stuttering, "I – I shouldn't have yelled before, I... I..."

"Don't worry about it. Happens to us all." And I smile genuinely for the first time today.

I let go of the bag and she stays motionless for a moment, swaying. Then she nods and briskly turns, retreating to the front of the store.

110 I watch her until she disappears into an aisle smelling of BenGay and Neosporin¹². Then I turn to face the crowd of customers waiting for me.

Force a smile, I remind myself, and struggle but manage to do just so. "Can I help the next person?"

(2016)

¹² *BenGay* and *Neosporin*: medications for minor illnesses