

the Innocence TREATMENT

ARI GOELMAN

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Video Clip #5

Exp

PAXEON

LAUREN C. FIELD

PAXEON

Description:

A young man in a maroon t-shirt sits at a small table. His eyes are red-rimmed and his nose running. Likely with the aftereffects of

Transcribed from intake interview:
Hello, Lauren. I'm Dr. Brechel. I'm here to
What's today?

California.

Caption: Two hours later-post



Additional

There are
would-be
list of his handlers and their contact information. A drug
boss turns over detailed access information on the invest-
ment accounts where he's laundered his illicit fortune. An

ence Treatment

mental testing protocol #0230A67

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Dedicated to E, M & D

It is better that ten guilty persons escape,
than that one innocent suffer.

—**WILLIAM BLACKSTONE** (1723–1780)

We are launching a major attack on the Enemy;
let there be no resentment if we bump someone with
an elbow. Better that ten innocent people should suffer
than one spy get away. When you chop wood, chips fly.

—**NIKOLAI YEZHOV** (1895–1940)

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

2031 doesn't seem like that long ago to me. Yet somehow a full decade has gone by since my sister's operation.

A lot has changed since then. In 2031, the United States was still enjoying the lull between the first and second uprisings. A drought was drying out the last of the great western forests, but it would be another two years before the massive wildfires that left millions homeless and sparked the second uprising.

In the meantime, the first uprising had receded into the distance. Back then, we didn't call it the *first* uprising, of course. We just called it "the Emergency." It was supposed to be a onetime event, something that would never happen again. The power grid was back on, more or less. The government was back to functioning, more or less. People bought the best solar panels they could afford, and kept their garages full of fuel for

their emergency generators. Aside from that, we mostly pretended that the Emergency had never happened.¹

My sister wasn't the famous Innocence Girl yet. She was just poor, benighted Lauren Fielding, nervously awaiting the operation that would finally "fix" her. As though she wasn't perfect exactly the way she was.

But that's enough from me. I've pulled this book together to let Lauren tell her own story in her own words.

I hope you find that the following text offers an illuminating portrait of one of the great heroes of our age. Lauren, if you're reading this, I love you.

Dr. E. Sofia Fielding, Ph.D.
London, UK
June 2041

¹This is based on my personal recollection. For a more academic take on the inter-uprising period in the United States, please see Margaret Evans's excellent retrospective, *While Rome Burned* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2035).

A note on sources: I downloaded the bulk of Lauren’s journal entries, along with her therapist transcripts and the two video clips described in the text, from the RIP section of the Swedish website Wiki-Plus. Rather than stick to strict chronological order, I’ve placed each therapist transcript immediately after the most relevant journal entries.

The final five journal entries are published here for the first time. They came into my possession as handwritten hard copy several years ago. I’ve since had a panel of independent forensic-document experts verify them to have been written in Lauren’s hand.

Aside from the reordering noted above, I’ve changed nothing substantive in any of the journal entries. I’ve cleaned up the grammar and spelling and minimized the profanity (for obvious reasons having to do with publication in jurisdictions like the New Confederacy and the Singapore Federation), but that’s it. —ESF

JOURNAL OF LAUREN C. FIELDING

Monday, September 1, 2031

Dear Dr. Corbin,

You said it was really important that I start a journal so you could tell whether my brain starts getting better after the operation tomorrow. The thing is, I have no idea what to write. So I decided I would start by writing you a thank-you note. I hope that's okay.

Thank you soooo much! My father says you're like this super-important scientist, and here you are spending all this time helping me. I never had the guts to tell you this to your face, but you sort of remind me of one of the fairies from the old version of *Sleeping Beauty*. The wise one, I mean—not one of the funny ones

who keep bickering over what color Princess Aurora's dress should be. I think her name's Flora.²

Have you seen the old 2-D Walt Disney movies, Dr. Corbin? My friends think I'm stupid old-fashioned, but I've watched all the old Disney movies like a million times. I watch new movies with my friends, too, but I don't usually get them. Not really. There's always someone bad pretending to be good or maybe someone who seems mean, but who's actually nice deep down or something. Honestly, most of the movies I see, I don't even try to follow the story. I just look at the clothes. People wear such nice clothes in movies.

But the old Disney movies are easy to understand—even for me. The good guys are good, the bad guys are bad. Sometimes there's something a little tricky, like in *Aladdin* when the bad wizard pretends to be an old man for a little bit, but I can almost always figure those bits out after a few times through.

Sorry if I'm rambling, Dr. Corbin! You said I should talk about what's going on in my head, but all I can think about is what's going to happen tomorrow. And you—of all people—already know about that. My dad said there's no one in the world who knows more about what's wrong with me than you, and that you're the one who figured out that I didn't just have a weird variant of Williams syndrome, like all the other doctors always

² I believe Lauren means Fauna, the green fairy in the 1959 version of *Sleeping Beauty*. Our parents never allowed her to see the 2023 remake due to its explicit sexual references.

said. So I feel a little dumb telling *you* what's going to happen tomorrow.

But okay. I'm sitting on my bed, talking this into my tablet, and all I'm thinking about is that tomorrow my parents will drive me back to your lab. One of the doctors who works for you is going to give me drugs to make me go to sleep, and then you're going to cut open my head. My skull and everything. You said you're not going to operate on my brain, not exactly, but cutting a little window in my skull seems pretty close, don't you think?

Shoot, Dr. Corbin. I just thought of something. Are you going to have to cut my hair before the operation? I wish I had asked that super-nice orderly—Eric—who showed me around last time I was at your office.

Eric took me to the room where I'll be staying and the room where you'll be doing the operation. He even asked if I wanted to see the tools you were going to use to open me up. He told me you have a special chain saw to cut through my skull, like a smaller version of what my dad would use to cut up a log. (Eric doesn't know my father, or he would know my father has never, in his whole life, cut up a log.) After Eric told me about the chain saw, he laughed and said he was kidding, but I don't know if he was really kidding or if he was just saying he was kidding to make me feel better. I'm really bad at telling stuff like that.

Which is why, even with the whole head-cutting-open thing, I'm super-excited about tomorrow. Because afterward, I won't be stupid anymore. Not that I'm stupid, exactly, but you know what I mean. I'll get when people are joking. I'll be able to . . . what did

you call it? Draw inferences. That will be awesome. I love so many people so much—it's going to be amazing to really understand them.

Your friend,
Lauren C. Fielding

CASE NOTES OF DR. FINLAY BRECHEL

December 2, 2031

The subject, Lauren Fielding, is a sixteen-year-old girl. Skinny, verging on gaunt, but muscular. Postoperative scars still visible through crew-cut hair. A far cry from her preoperative photos three months ago, in which she was a slightly plump redhead with shoulder-length hair, smiling broadly in every picture.

According to her medical chart, she remanded herself to the custody of this facility twenty-three days ago, about two months after being treated here for a preexisting disability. Neither the details of her initial disability, nor the course of treatment, are entirely clear to me, but as far as I can tell, her disability had both cognitive and behavioral components. (Her medical papers repeatedly mention “modified

oligodendrocytes"—I have no real idea what that means. I know oligodendrocytes are a type of brain cell that connect different parts of the brain, but I can't imagine that it's possible to deliberately modify such tiny, poorly understood cells. Ah, to be a neuroscientist instead of a humble psychologist . . .)

I have sent Dr. Corbin a note asking for more details regarding Ms. Fielding's treatment and case history, but I'm not entirely sure I'll understand any additional details she provides. It seems to me that Corbin is operating somewhere on the frontiers of brain science with her treatment of Ms. Fielding, while my understanding is stuck in 2024 or so.

What I do know is that Ms. Fielding is currently exhibiting pronounced signs of paranoid delusions. I believe these delusions are responsible for the multiple violent episodes she's initiated since coming to this facility. Due to previous assaults on past therapists and orderlies (including a particularly violent one on the orderly Eric Schafer, who she mentions so favorably in her first journal entry), she is heavily restrained when we meet.

Transcribed from intake interview:

Hello, Lauren. I'm Dr. Brechel. I'm here to—

What's today?

Tuesday. Why do you—

No. The date. What's today's date?

Oh. Ah. December 2.

(silence)

Is there a reason that the date's important to you?

(silence, then a slow, wry nod) Trying to prepare myself, I guess. I scheduled my post to go live on December 4, so I figure they'll kill me soon after.

Who will kill you?

(shrugs) Dr. Corbin. Paxeon. The Department.

Anyone who wants the Emergency Act to be extended. They're all going to be pretty mad.

Why's that?

I arranged for some things to go public, things that I don't think they're going to be very happy about. Details about what they did to me.

And what did they do to you?

I don't want to be the person who tells you. You seem like a nice guy. I see you're divorced, but I'm guessing you have kids, right?

(Note—I would swear that my face showed nothing here, but the subject nodded to herself.)

Sorry. I couldn't resist. Sasha calls it my Sherlock Holmes trick. It was easy—you keep touching your ring finger like you're expecting to find a ring to fidget with, but there's nothing there. The kids were just a guess, but your eyes widened a bit when I mentioned them, so I'm guessing I was right. No custody, I assume, if

you're living at Paxeon, which of course you are, as I don't think anyone could be as clean-shaven as you if they weren't living super-close to where they work, and I know most of the staff here lives on-site. Still, you must care about the kids or you wouldn't have reacted quite so much when I mentioned them.

So, yeah, I'm not going to give you any details. Not today. I don't want to make your kids orphans. If you decide to stick around, you might want to take out some life insurance.

I understand you've attacked a few of your therapists.

Oh, I'm sorry—did you think I was threatening you? How would that work, with me in my ankle cuffs and handcuffs? Believe me, Dr. Brechel, I'm the least of your worries. My advice to you is quit while you can. They'd still let you walk away at this point. Probably. It can't hurt to try.

JOURNAL OF LAUREN C. FIELDING

Friday, September 26, 2031

Dear Dr. Corbin,

Well, here I am, back at home. It's a beautiful autumn day. The sun is shining, the leaves are changing color, and I'm stuck inside. I wish my head didn't hurt so much. I love walking through the woods on this kind of fall day, with the leaves swirling down around me.

I've been home for a week now, which I guess means it's been more than three weeks since the operation. I don't remember the operation at all. One second I was lying down talking to you while another doctor fiddled with the big drug machine. The next second, I was half-asleep in another room with the world's worst headache.

I didn't totally wake up until like a week after the operation.

I guess you had me on superstrong painkillers so I wouldn't be too uncomfortable while the big cuts on my head healed. Thanks for that! Though—ugh—I have to tell you I freaked when I got my first look in a mirror after the operation. I look like girl Frankenstein, with stitches and metal staples all over my scalp.

That was the worst part of preparing for the operation—when Eric shaved my head. Eric had been super-nice all day, helping me get ready, but it was still hard to sit there in the waiting room and feel the electric razor moving over my scalp.

I had terrific hair. Red, glossy, and down to my shoulders. And now I don't even have a crew cut. Just bandaged skin and a little stubble.

Like I said, I was totally hazy for the first week or so. I sort of remember Eric feeding me and washing me. I *think* I remember you examining me a few times, and I definitely remember when you told my parents they could take me home last week.

Now, three weeks after the operation, my head is finally starting to feel better, but I still get this killer headache when I move too fast or stare at anything for too long. Just talking to my computer for these few minutes has made my head hurt worse. I'll try again tomorrow.

Your friend,
Lauren

CASE NOTES OF DR. FINLAY BRECHEL

December 3, 2031

Transcribed from interview:

Good morning, Lauren.

What's the date?

December 3.

Any announcements on the Emergency Act being
allowed to expire?

*Nothing that I've seen. Dr. Corbin mentioned that
you're very concerned about the expiry of the
Emergency Act. Tell me about—*

(subject interrupts) I'm concerned? (laughter) I'd
say she was the concerned one. I mean, which of
us has a research project specifically devoted to
extending it?

(more laughter) Sorry. I think they shot me full of some drug to make me talk to you, and it's making me laugh more than usual. Or maybe you're just a lot funnier than those Paxeon bastards they had in here before. With them, the drugs just made me want to kick their faces in. *Yes, I've seen their medical records. You broke Dr. Meyers's nose and knocked out two of Dr. Stewart's teeth.*

I'm not a big fan of Paxeon flunkies. I think you and I will get along fine.

Just to be clear—I work for Paxeon as much as any of your former therapists did. As of last week, I'm a full-time Paxeon employee—Dr. Corbin insisted that I clear my very busy practice and focus only on you.

(laughter) You're no Paxeon flunky. You're not smug enough, and—no offense—your clothes aren't expensive enough. That's why I'm worried about you. Dr. Corbin doesn't strike me as someone who tolerates a lot of leftovers. Look. If you're determined to stick around, at the very least upload your notes to one of the Swedish platforms. You know, where they'll publish your blog if you don't log in for a certain number of days. Just give Paxeon a reason to keep you alive. That's all I'm saying.

Dr. Corbin has no intention of hurting me, nor of hurting you. On the contrary, she worked very hard to find a therapist she thought could help you. Why would she bring me here to focus exclusively on you if she had any interest in harming you?

Huh. Gee. She must be a saint after all. (laughter)
Sorry. Sorry. I'm just imagining nuns lighting candles in front of a picture of Dr. Corbin's evil little face. You know—like one of those paintings where the saint's face has a halo behind it. Saint Patricia of the gigantic bank account.

Hmm. At any rate—if you agree, we'll be meeting twice a day for at least the next month.

Dr. Corbin feels very responsible for your condition, and is sparing no cost to—

(Note—Subject lapsed into hysterical laughter, so much so that I was on the verge of summoning orderlies when she began to calm down.)

Oh my God. I really can't tell—is it the drugs or are you the funniest man I've ever met? If it's the drugs, I totally get why people abuse this stuff. Of course Corbin *feels* responsible! She *is* responsible for my condition.

So you blame Dr. Corbin for your current situation?

Obviously I blame Dr. Corbin. And, hey, you want

to know one reason why Corbin was so keen to find me a therapist I would talk to?

Yes, I do.

Like I told you, I have everything set to be posted online December 4. Tomorrow. All the journal entries that I wrote—the real journal entries, I mean—not the edited crap that I sent Corbin. Plus all the Department memos I stole . . . everything is going to be posted. Corbin must be desperate to keep that from happening. That's why she hired you. To pry the password out of me before it's too late.

I see. You believe Dr. Corbin wants me to insinuate myself into your good graces in the interests of stopping your information from being posted on the Internet.

Exactly.

Which is set to happen tomorrow, correct? So she thought I could somehow divine your password in two days or less?

I didn't tell her exactly when I'd set it to go live.

Just early December sometime.

All right. Let me propose an experiment. Don't tell me your password. Let's see what happens tomorrow. If I come back and we continue our conversation as usual, even with your information up on the Internet, then perhaps

we can agree that you've misjudged Dr. Corbin's intentions.

In the meantime, allow me to help you separate fact from fiction. I have neither the ability nor the inclination to somehow ferret information from you. I'm here to assess the stability of your condition, help you become conscious of your own mental state, and ultimately prepare you to rejoin society.

Oh. Jeez. Really? My mistake. I guess I should just relax, then, huh?

(long silence)

We'll talk again tomorrow, okay?

Whenever you want, Dr. Brechel. Just keep the laughs coming.

JOURNAL OF LAUREN C. FIELDING

Monday, October 6, 2031

Hi Dr. Corbin,

My mom gave me all your messages and told me I had to start writing more journal entries for you so you could tell if I'm getting better. Thanks for checking in on me! I'm sorry I didn't send you anything last week. Honestly, I've been feeling pretty ragged. I'm still not feeling so great, but today my mom let my friends Riley and Gabriella visit, so at least I have something to tell you about.

Riley and Gabriella and I have been best friends since forever. You might even know Riley's father—Blair Halston. My father says you and the rest of the people at Paxeon work really closely with the Department, and Mr. Halston is a super-bigwig at the Department.

Riley walked in and sat on the side of my bed. "Lauren! I can't believe you chopped off all your hair."

“Not me,” I said. “The hospital orderly.”

“It looks good,” Gabriella said. She put a bag full of papers on top of my desk. “You look like a sexy punk.”

“Hey, thanks!” Up until then, I’d been thinking I looked horrible.

Gabriella nudged the bag with her foot. “We already have a ton of assignments. I can’t believe how much harder eleventh grade is. With college visits and stuff, it’s like we have no time for anything but school this year.”

“You should have had the operation in May,” Riley said. “That way you could have skipped all your finals.”

“No,” Gabriella said. “They would have made her take finals in July, and she wouldn’t have had any summer vacation at all. Anyway, September is always the worst month of school. I wish I got to miss it, too.”

My mother swept into the room carrying a vase full of flowers. “Don’t be too jealous, girls. Lauren’s going to have to make up all the work she misses. These are beautiful, by the way. Look at what your friends brought you, Lauren.”

“Thanks guys,” I said.

“Riley paid,” Gabriella pushed some of my stuffed animals aside and flopped down on my beanbag. “But I helped pick them out.”

“I didn’t pay,” Riley said. “My father put me in touch with a florist friend of his, that’s all.”

“Tell him thanks,” I said. It’s great having a friend whose father is high up in the Department. Last year for Riley’s birthday, he got the three of us tickets to an FG concert that was sold out months in advance.

Riley shrugged. “Just imagine if you were a friend of Cedar’s—your mom would have needed a dozen vases.”

(This might make you think Cedar is Riley’s brother or something, but Cedar is actually her father’s dog—one of those super-fluffy white dogs. A Pomerian, if you know what those look like, Dr. Corbin. Riley is always talking about how her father likes Cedar more than her. By now even *I* know she’s joking when she brings it up.)

“Now, Riley—” my mother was saying, when her phone beeped. She looked at it. “Damn,” she said. “I have to take this. You girls remember that Lauren had major brain surgery a month ago. No music, no videos, and no loud noises.” She opened the door to Evelyn’s room, across the hall.

My sister, Evelyn, was sitting at her desk, typing on her computer. Most kids I know just talk their papers into their devices, but Evelyn still keyboards everything. She says it’s easier to catch careless mistakes that way. God knows why she cares—mistakes or no mistakes, she’d still be the smartest girl in our high school.

“Evelyn,” my mother said. “Did you hear me?”

Evelyn nodded without looking up. “You told them to remember that Lauren just had brain surgery. I don’t think they’re going to forget. Could you close my door, please?”

“No. I want you to make sure they have a very quiet, mellow visit.”

At this, Evelyn did look up. “What? For God’s sake, they’re sixteen. If you can’t trust them, just kick them out.”

My mother ignored her, putting on her headset as she walked away from us.

Evelyn sighed and turned to Riley and Gabriella. “You heard her. Keep it down, or I’m throwing you out.” She stood and closed the door to her room.

“Hi Evelyn,” Riley said to the closed door. “Nice to see you, Evelyn.”

Gabriella laughed. Then she asked me, “So did the operation work?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Did you hear that Bea Thomas grew an extra arm?” Riley patted her head. “Straight out the top of her head. It’s to help her reach higher shelves in the grocery store.”

“No way! That must look so crazy.”

Riley frowned. “I don’t think the operation helped, Lauren. Beatrice Thomas didn’t, you know, really grow a third arm. No one could do that.”

“It’s okay,” Gabriella said to me. “Maybe it’ll happen slowly.”

I peeked inside the bag of schoolwork that Gabriella had brought home, but just for a second. I’m not starting the makeup work until it stops hurting to read. “So what have I missed?”

“I bombed a trigonometry test,” Riley said.

“Me too,” Gabriella said. “Trig is a lot harder than geometry.”

I frowned. Math has always been like the one class I *don’t* need help with. I hope I don’t have to start going to tutors for math, too.

“Aside from classes, what’s been happening?” I asked.

Gabriella shrugged. “Jacob Kalish started dating Kee Ting Tam.

Oh, and there's this new guy, Sasha, who Riley thinks is hot. He lives right around here, actually."

"Sasha *is* extremely good-looking," Riley said. "There's nothing subjective about it."

"Oh—and oh my God!" Gabriella said. "You missed the whole deal with Dr. Newman."

"Dr. Newman the history teacher?" I asked. My sister, Evelyn, really likes Dr. Newman, but he only teaches honors courses, so I've never had him.

"No," Riley said. "Dr. Newman the sex offender who used to be the history teacher."

"What?!" I said.

Gabriella shook her head, eyes wide. "Principal Abbott had an assembly with the whole school and he almost started crying when he talked about how Newman was a sex offender and we should call the police right away if we ever see him again."

"I heard he abducted Peter . . . ah, what's-his-name?" Riley said.

"Connelly," Gabriella supplied.

"Wait," I said. "Evelyn's friend? Newman abducted Peter? Are you joking again?" Across the hall, Evelyn's door opened a crack.

Riley shook her head. "Nope. That's what I heard. And I haven't seen Peter around for a few days. So it's possible, anyway."

Evelyn's door slammed back shut.

"What?" Riley called across the hallway. "You don't think Peter was abducted?"

Evelyn flung her door all the way open, so abruptly that I

jumped. “Of course I don’t think Peter was abducted. At least not by Dr. Newman. Who—by the way—is definitely *not* a sex offender. I think Newman said some things in class that got back to the wrong people.”

“The ‘wrong people’? Do you mean people who work for the Department?” Riley was smiling as she asked this, so maybe she was joking. “Or, maybe, you think one of the sponsoring corporations had him arrested?”

“Riley!” Gabriella said.

“What?” Riley said. “You’re allowed to say anything you want in private, and anyway, my dad says it’s not against the Emergency Act if you ask it like a question.”

“Your father would know, wouldn’t he?” Evelyn said. Riley shut her mouth so suddenly you could hear the click when her teeth banged together. “And no,” Evelyn said. “I certainly didn’t mean the Department. I would *never* say anything negative about the Department or one of the sponsoring corporations who work so hard to keep us all safe.”

By the way, Dr. Corbin, just in case you don’t know: when someone mentions the “Department,” they almost always mean the United States Department of Security, Defense, and Well-Being. It took me forever to figure that out. I used to get really confused between “the Department” and department stores like Nordstrom and the legal department where my mother works. Why would you use the same word to describe three things that are so different? And why doesn’t anyone else find that confusing? Can your operation really help me understand something like that? I sure hope

so! Anyway, the Department is the government agency that keeps us safe and makes sure another Emergency doesn't happen.

"So who did you mean?" I asked. "When you said it 'got back to the wrong people'?"

Evelyn stared past me for so long that I looked out my window, too, trying to see what was so interesting. It was a nice day, sunny, with the maple tree in our yard in full autumn colors. But there was nothing happening out there except for a squirrel running down one of the maple's branches.

Do you have squirrels where you live, Dr. Corbin? I don't know what happened, but during the Emergency it was like all the squirrels in Bethesda disappeared for a few years. It's only now we're starting to see them again.³

³ What happened, of course, is that people got hungry. Us included. A few weeks after Hurricane Josephine, my mother took nine-year-old Lauren on some made-up errand while my father and I waited in the yard with a .22 rifle. He managed to get three squirrels, still plump with the summer's bounty. We made squirrel-and-potato stew on my parents' old camping stove that evening, and ate well for the first time in a week.

It's funny. The first uprising is generally remembered as a national tragedy, the end of American innocence, etc. But I remember the weeks immediately after Hurricane Josephine fondly. My parents weren't working for once. Every night, with the power dead, they told Lauren and me stories over candlelight. During the days, I'd tramp around the traffic-less roads with my father as he looked for a cell-phone signal. Or walk to the government depot with my mother, charge up our tablets, and drag home our day's allotment of water.

We heard radio reports about riots in the District, and the terrorist attacks on the White House, but we didn't see any violence around us. On the contrary—I never saw people so friendly. We met neighbors we'd never seen before. It wasn't until almost a full month later that things got scary, with people getting arrested and troops everywhere.

“I don’t know,” she finally said. “People who disagreed with him, I guess.”

“So you think that some people said he was a sex offender just because they disagreed with him?”

Evelyn made a funny face, like she had sucked on a lemon or something. “I don’t know, Lauren. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Good idea,” Gabriella said. “So Evelyn. What universities are you applying to?”

Evelyn blinked a few times. “I’m not sure,” she said finally. “I want to go to England for university, but my dad wants me to stay close to home. We’re still arguing about it.”

“Wow!” Gabriella said. “Do you mean like Oxford or Cambridge? You’re so smart you could get in anywhere.”

“I don’t really care where,” Evelyn said. “As long as it’s out of this country.”

“What’s wrong with *this* country?” Riley asked.

Evelyn took a deep breath and let it out. “Nothing that I’m prepared to say in front of you.”

“O-M-G,” Riley said. (That stands for “Oh my God,” Dr. Corbin.) “Just because I disagree with you doesn’t make me an informant!”

“Not yet,” Evelyn said.

“What?” I said. “What do you mean?” I turned to Riley. “Did you get a job? Are you going to be an informant?”

Riley frowned. “No. I’m not going to be an informant. I’m also not going to spend all my spare time alone in my bedroom, believing every conspiracy theory some dowdy loser posts online.” Then she smiled at Evelyn and said, “By the way, I *love* what you’ve

done with your hair, Evelyn. What stylist do you use? You didn't do that yourself, did you?"

It was nice of Riley to say, but honestly, Dr. Corbin, Evelyn just had her hair in a loose braid. It wasn't even a particularly good one, with plenty of curls already escaped and falling over her face. She has red hair like mine—like mine used to be, I mean—but curlier. If she spent a little time on it, it would look gorgeous, but she mostly throws it into a ponytail or a braid and forgets about it.

I touched my own head, thinking of my lost hair, and accidentally brushed one of the scabs where you cut my head open. My scabs still hurt a lot when the painkillers wear off.

Evelyn noticed me wincing. "Okay," she said. "Visit's over. Lauren's tired. Time for you guys to go."

"I'm okay," I said.

Evelyn ignored me. "Thanks for coming! Come again soon." She waved her hand at my friends like she was shooing flies out of the room.

When they were gone, Evelyn sat on the floor, leaning against my bed. Her shoulders slumped.

"I just accidentally touched my scab," I said. "I'm not tired."

"I'm tired," Evelyn said. "Tired of your friends. Sorry." She picked up Mr. Piglet, one of my old stuffed animals, and put him on her lap.

Neither of us said anything else for a few minutes. This is pretty normal. Evelyn comes into my room all the time, and lots of times we don't talk. Sometimes she brings her computer with her and

does her work while I watch a video or something. This time she just hugged Mr. Piglet and sat there.

After a while I yawned.

Evelyn stood up and kissed my cheek. “Have a nap,” she said. “Dr. Corbin said you’d need lots of rest for a few weeks.”

“I know.”

“Just remember our rule,” she said.

“I remember,” I said.

She left, and I fell asleep. I slept for a few hours, until some little kids playing outside woke me up. Then my mother brought me some soup, and then I felt well enough to get all this down.

I have to say, Dr. Corbin, that so far I don’t think your operation has helped much. After I talked this entry into my tablet, I read it over twice, and I still don’t understand lots of what Riley and Evelyn were talking about this afternoon. Did Evelyn really think that some people who disagreed with Dr. Newman got him arrested as a sex offender? If so, wouldn’t that make her really mad? I don’t think she was really mad today. And why did Evelyn make Riley leave right after Riley complimented her on her hair? Does that make sense to you?

I’m so sick of not understanding anybody.

My head hurts and I’m going back to sleep.

Your friend,

Lauren