

A man in a black uniform and cap stands in front of a door. The door has the word 'TOILET' written on it. The man has a stern expression and is wearing a black coat with a 'POTTY PATROL' patch. Large cyan text is overlaid on the image.

TOILET

**MEG IN
THE
SYSTEM**

CHRISTIAN COUCHE

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

Meg in the System

Meg In The System by Christian Couche

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THE POTTY

The line for the toilet stretched for miles and miles snaking through the ruins of the city all over and around the broken glass, crumbled red and brown brick, smashed concrete. There were hundreds or even thousands of miserable cold people huddled below blankets and rags and it never seemed to end. Meg stood under an abandoned shop with a dim streetlight straining on her own torn gray jacket while she really had to pee. As the line slowly but dutifully inched forward, Meg briefly considered sneaking away to go find relief behind an abandoned warehouse or collapsed apartment, but she quickly refused the thought. The Potty Patrol with their sharp black uniforms and shiny boots were always looking for anyone who did not wait their turn or pay their fee for the privilege of using one of the Captain's filthy public toilets.

As Meg danced back and forth between her right and left foot, the creeping anxiety that she would not have time to make it back to her cold and empty bedroom before class crept up her tummy and shivered its way all through her. She debated skipping the line and using the toilets at her university which were slightly cleaner and usually had shorter lines. But she would never make it. She would have to stay in the queue no matter how much it hurt, and no matter how expensive it was because she had no choice.

The only thing to distract her in the dim cold morning light was a bright oppressively large white and black billboard towering over everyone. Put up by the System, this was the only thing brightly lit in this dismal part of town. The cold sterile light illuminated every inch of the white background and stern black letters as it hummed with ruthless efficiency. It was the motto of the Captain and there were thousands of them posted all over the dark and bleak city. Although Meg had seen them a million times a day, she read and

reread this one now because she was bored and feeling an intense pressure on her bladder. *'The Potty is Power'* it said.

When it was her turn, Meg tried to go as quickly as she could partially so she wouldn't be late, but also to have to see and smell the slimy stained toilet as little as possible. The Potty Patrol was always reminding everyone how lucky they were to have a public toilet and how hard the Captain worked to maintain them but Meg wondered how much of that actually trickled down to this small, dreary stall with a broken handle and hideous smell. Maybe the Potty Patrol officer on duty outside could stop collecting fees to take a few minutes to clean this rancid spot but she knew better than to think such seditious thoughts. It could land her in jail or worse.

Meg had barely enough time to run back to her room while the holes in her worn black boots cut into her feet before class. She could only grab her books and throw a slice of stale plain toast in her mouth and chew while she waved a cheerful hello to kind Mrs. Peterson next door. She patted Little Joey on his fluffy brown hair before sprinting through the dimly lit hallway down the stairs and out the thick badly painted dented dark brown door and around the corner. Masterfully dodging every decaying obstacle in her path, she ran to the white gates of the System University dutifully nodding to the Potty Patrol officer on guard outside the gate. The stairs to her classroom had once been white but had turned grimy gray from the thousands of students, like Meg, over the years. She took them two at a time.

Maybe she did not quite have to sprint as she sat down panting at her desk. Besides, Derek was not in yet, and as long as he was late, she knew she wouldn't be in trouble. Always best to be the second one late.

The Captain in his crisp black buttoned uniform kept a stern eye on all the pupils through the strong gaze under black eyebrows in the picture hung above the blackboard at the front of the classroom. It was only a portrait, but it still made Meg a little nervous even though she had not done anything wrong.

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"Hello, Meg!" Derek shouted to her as he quickly sat down next to her. They could talk a little before the University bell rang once class officially began. "The lines for the toilet were ghastly this morning."

Meg nodded in agreement half staring at the brown door and waiting for the teacher to arrive. "I'm thinking about joining the Junior Potty Patrol," Derek muttered half to himself and Meg was surprised a little. "It's a dreadfully good job," and Meg had to nod at that. "Good rations, and no bloody wait in a queue for a friggin' toilet!" Meg was half distracted waiting for class and the bell but half thinking that Derek was too nice to join the Potty Patrol. "Oh, and I sneaked you a crust of bread on the way out."

Meg smiled at her friend and gratefully chewed the tough and nearly bitter course bread. She was hungry but she was used to that.

The bell rang and the teacher entered with his disheveled brown tweed jacket and crooked tie. She was still chewing as the whole class stood with dutiful union and recited the Motto of the System. THE POTTY IS POWER they all announced and Meg thought she saw the Captain smirk a little through the cold stern eyes in his portrait.



It was after school, and Meg was sitting in the slightly broken brown wooden chair in Mrs. Peterson's apartment. The chair was a wooden brown rocker, small, and the arm would pop out of its hole if Meg hit it just wrong. The tea was lovely, and the brown and red-checked curtains were old and torn but inviting. She rocked in Mrs. Peterson's favorite chair as Mrs. Peterson stood in the kitchen watching Little Joey play with his wooden car despite the broken wheel.

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Mrs. Peterson was the only person in the building to ever invite Meg in. While everyone else scurried behind quickly closed doors, Mrs. Peterson had been friendly, wishing Meg a cheery good morning or afternoon. It was possible that Mrs. Peterson could afford to be so generous because she worked for the System. While she did not do anything serious and she was not a member of the Potty Patrol, she explained that she did the cleaning at the System headquarters but that was enough for her to get a few extra tea bags or the jam Megan was eating on her warm toast. It was the most delicious thing she had eaten in months.

"Oh, I know, Dearie," she said over the clink of her own teacup. "Those toilet lines are just dreadful."

Meg nodded but was only focused on her toast. It was strawberry jam, deep red and it glistened in the tan lines of the toast.

"Sometimes, I envy Little Joey." Mrs. Peterson sat down at the kitchen table on a tan chair that creaked and moaned. "Little Dearie is not potty trained yet," and she smiled but sighed. "He doesn't have to worry about lines or stinky toilets or not having the money to pay. Why, they just raised the fees again!"

"How do you do it, Mrs. Peterson?" Meg asked, "I never see you in the toilet line?"

"Oh, I do occasionally, Dearie." She poured warm water into Meg's cup "I have to drag Little Joey out all buttoned up. I wait in the line while that lucky little guy just goes in his diaper."

"Oh, it's so tough," Meg nodded and sipped her warm tea.

The boiling water on the stove seemed to warm the whole apartment and tossed up little wisps of steam which circled around in the single light bulb for a second before it evaporated out but left its warmth. "Well, I usually wait and use the toilets at the System headquarters." She leaned back a little "You know that big glass building by the City Auditorium. The toilets in the office are so clean. You don't have to wait in line, Dearie. No line. No money. Clean toilets

every time." And Mrs. Peterson sighed a little. "There is nothing those people don't get." She frowned a little.

"How does Little Joey manage?" Meg was making conversation now. She really wanted another slice of toast with the glorious jelly.

"Well..." She frowned in Meg's direction. "Little Joey is not potty trained yet. So, he is still in diapers. We'll have to potty train him soon." And she turned to Little Joey with a big smile and in a sing-song voice, "Won't we little one? Who's a little one?" And Little Joey smiled and giggled and went back to playing with his wobbly toy car. "It's illegal not to be potty trained after age three." She looked very worried. "They could take him away from me! Oh Dearie, if only his father were alive!"

She shook her head as if she were shaking off a bad feeling and continued in a more matter-of-fact manner. "You see, Dearie, Little Joey's diapers are strictly rationed. The Potty Patrol brings me a box every week."

"That's what those deliveries are?" Meg realized, suddenly remembering the large black boxes stacked outside Mrs. Peterson's brown door, "I've seen the box out there every Monday on my way to school"

Mrs. Peterson nodded in assent. "They drop off a certain number and I have to keep the used ones in a bag." She motioned over to the white semi-cylindrical bin in the corner, "I have to turn the used ones in, and the Potty Patrol comes to collect them."

"That's interesting," Meg distractedly said.

Mrs. Peterson signed but suddenly smiled, "Can I tell you a little secret, Dearie?"

Meg nodded, it was a really good jam.

Mrs. Peterson looked slyly around even though no one else was there. "Sometimes, Dearie, if Little Joey has a few diapers left over..." She paused and smiled before confessing. "I'll use them!" And

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Mrs. Peterson broke into a big smile and a few notes of genuine laughter.

"Mrs. Peterson!" Meg smiled back in real surprise and then the women laughed together around the circular table. A good, short, but deep laugh. "You're bad!"

"Oh, I know, Dearie." Mrs. Peterson had a kind, happy expression on her old face. "Hey. The Potty is Power" and they both laughed again.



Meg was running late to school and desperately had to pee. She was dancing and sliding over all the broken obstacles like a little jackrabbit and listening to the pain in her bladder, the dam about to burst. Being late was her perpetual state and she was able to run at nearly full speed down the deserted ally. Even the Potty Patrol avoided this strip which she could tell because the few "Potty is Power" posters were faded and ripped and the Captain had dust on him like everything else this way. She could run at full speed but had to slow down as she turned down the main street littered with city denizens and trash.

The main street was somehow colder, and Meg shivered a little as she transitioned to a brisk walk. Moving with the crowd in a giant wave, she only had a short walk until she could see the System University at the end of the street commanding her with strong white hands and solid marble.

The two beggar children were off to the side and Meg barely noticed, turning her eyes like everyone else and making a large circle on the pavement to avoid them as best she could. In the circle, in the crowd, where the walkers and workers turned up their noses and refused to look, Meg saw the trash and turned her eyes looking down the street with the callous indifference shared by everyone else who

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took no notice of their outstretched hands or skinny rags. And neither did Meg.

THE PUBLIC TRIAL

Meg and Derek were sitting in the dark in the large auditorium of their school waiting for the mandatory televised Public Trial to begin. This monthly ritual seemed like such a source of joy for everyone else but Meg, who sat quietly in the dark somewhere in the middle, with fake fellowship and dark solemnity. Why did everyone enjoy these parades of guilt and shame? She found it humiliating and boring to see people forced in front of a camera on live TV in front of a large crowd in the City Auditorium confess their guilt and have people cheer.

Even though the painful ritual occurred monthly, Meg always wondered where all these deviants came from. It seemed like every month there were more, brought out on leashes and in cages by the Potty Patrol to confess their crimes publicly and then get lectured by the Captain on the virtues of his System and then carted off to jail. Literally. They were often chained in carts. The Captain, stern and severe as always, would show mercy on one or two and let them go after begging forgiveness but most were sentenced to long prison terms.

Meg had gotten to see one in person once and she was as repulsed then as she was now. Sitting in the dark, she remembered it although it had been a long time ago. It was a field trip, and it was before she had met Derek. So she was all alone, and it was hard to pretend you were reading a book or studying on purpose when everyone else was laughing and playing. So, she looked out the window in quiet solitude on the giant bus with the bars on the thin window as her whole class drove slowly and noisily to the City Auditorium which was not new then but was in better shape. Nothing was new then, just like nothing was new now.

Meg sat in the dark of her school auditorium thinking about the stark cold unnatural light of that Auditorium. She only remembered the Captain, who seemed younger and more active in those days, giving a speech on the importance of uniformity. She remembered the long line of Potty Patrol Officers behind her in rows along the edge of the coliseum. The black of their uniforms was stark against the already decaying white marble and all the spectators in gray looking below and along the sides. The prisoners were brought out one by one in rags and chains and all confessed their crimes. One by one. There were all sorts. Using a private restroom. Not paying full price for a public toilet. Stealing food. The Captain lectured all of them one by one.

Then came the two that Megan remembered. They were two men accused of homosexuality. Brought out together, the Captain booed and jeered and kept encouraging the crowd to do the same. One of the men was very tall and nearly bald. The other was much shorter with fluffy red hair and a scraggly beard. Meg just watched, transfixed, as the Captain went on and on about how evil they were; how homosexuality was a sin and who those who practiced it were the worst; and how they should be cast out of society and shunned. The impassive row of Potty Patrol Officers stood at the back of the stage with clubs and shiny boots, faces covered by the masks of the riot gear.

What really gripped Meg and burned into her memory was the dignity on the faces of the two men. She didn't notice it at first, but she remembered seeing it in the millions of times she thought about that day. Their colorful clothes were in rags, their shoes were holey and open while their pants were bright and cheerful but now thin and worn. Despite all, their faces shone through the terror and brutality around them. They said nothing and their heads were held high while their eyes radiated a pride that Meg felt in her seat and kept her warm in the darkness. They were the only ones calm as the Captain was spitting and yelling and the crowd worked into a frenzy.

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"These people were responsible for all your misery!" the Captain yelled and the crowd seemed to agree and took out all their hunger, all their pain, and all their lost community on those two quiet and dignified men who seemed much --

Zoop! The paper airplane woke Meg up in the dark and snapped her back to reality where she was sitting in the small university auditorium which was just as dingy as ever and waited for the next Public Trial. Derek next to her caught the paper airplane and looked back at where it came from and smiled and pointed.

"Did you do it?" He laughed. "Did you?" And he crumpled it up and barely stood up and took his arms and threw it back jocularly. He then had to sit down quickly with an oops as the former paper airplane bounced off its first target and ricocheted around for a few minutes in the dark. He giggled as he sat down next to Meg and pretended to be watching the public trials which had just started and already seemed to be going on forever.



Meg sat in her room alone after school like she usually did. She ate her cold soggy dinner on her small desk with the slight but warm light emanating from the tiny desk lamp. She needed to study. Her room barely had enough space for a desk and a slender lumpy bed. Sitting on the slight, uncomfortable mattress, she leaned over on the short desk and tried to concentrate on whatever old, cracked, and broken textbook she could through the ripped pages. She simply could not pay attention. Every few seconds she tried but it never worked for long. Her eyes kept returning to the small paper flower, tucked in the books sitting haphazardly in unison.

The small paper flower was faded and green and the bright pedals had changed over the years to a dull orange. She had made it at the orphanage and although the years had come and gone she took

it with her everywhere. The cold miserable years of her youth had been replaced with the cold miserable years of now as she sat in her room alone. But the flower stayed.

She had never had many friends at the orphanage. It was hard to make friends when one was always pushing and shoving in the lines to use the toilet. "*The potty is power*," she told herself as she flipped a page without looking and stared at her little paper flower while she was cold and alone as always.

Derek had been her friend since she started at System University. He was just so kind and funny and when they sat there that first day, he started talking to her and they were friends. That's what made her days at college bearable while the nights in her room were anything but.

Meg felt the little tingle in her bladder, and she sighed. Standing up over her desk, she grabbed what few coins she could and hoped they would be enough. She looked back at her flower as she put on her worn and torn gray jacket and left the room to go join that long, lonely, cold line to the toilet.

MEG HAS A RUN IN WITH THE POTTY PATROL

The most terrible experience Meg had with a Potty Patrol Officer occurred a few days later when Megan was completely unprepared.

Meg had been in the line for the toilet for only about an hour when it started to snow. It was light at first, but soon, the white, cold, and wet flakes fell so thick and so massive it was as if the cloud had suddenly dropped. At first, Meg put her hands in her pockets and tried to ignore it and her squeezing bladder. Soon it was difficult to forget about either. It was the wind that hurt most of all. Cold, strong, and unrelenting, the frigid wind whipped up sideways and stung her face with a million pins and needles and had begun to soak through her torn gray jacket. A giant collective shiver went through the line, but none dared leave.

It was then that Meg decided to take the biggest risk of her life.

Looking back and forth to and fro, she decided to leave the line. Since she could not see in front of or behind her in line, she quickly darted out of the long queue of shivering rags and walked a few blocks causally before she darted between a row of apartment blocks she had presumed were abandoned because of all the broken windows, lack of light and complete absence of any human warmth. She was going to break the law.

Desperate to find a quietly unobtrusive place, the pain in Meg's bladder only made her heartbeat worse. She was getting desperate but felt somewhat relieved that the snow was thick and

she would not be noticed finding relief in one of the dark, cold, silent desiccated rooms littered all over this forgotten part of town.

Ducking through a broken entryway, she smelled cold dust as she made her way past the scattered desks and discarded papers and books. This had been a school she thought randomly as the minuscule light from some streetlamp or searchlight barely illuminated a faded happy duck painted on a dirty wall and a giant bear holding up some letters and numbers.

Throwing all caution into the snowy wind, Meg found a dark corner to relieve herself. A sigh of relief and mini exuberance drifted past the stack of schoolbooks as she felt safe and relieved in the comfort that she had gotten away with it. She was so comfortable in fact that she was not paying attention when she knocked over that huge metal desk on skinny legs which came crashing down slamming to the next cascading with horrible cacophony smashing and slamming and throwing up dust. It may have been for only a second or two but felt like a million to Meg.

Breathing as hard and as silently as she could, Meg waited for a few seconds but should have waited longer until she made a dart for the entrance but stopped dead when the light glared in her face.

"Who are you?" The voice was as cold as the light which chilled her worse than the cold snow, "What are you doing here?" "The voice barked.

Meg stood shocked as her feet started to tremble. From the leftover flashlight, she saw the tall, hulking, Potty Patrol Officer with a stone face and rigid demeanor. "I said, who are you?" He was hard to see below the severe square hat and black overcoat buttoned all the way to his thick neck. "ANSWER ME!"

She could only squeak out a tiny feeble "...Megan," the tears warming her face for a brief second. "I'm Meagan."

"Come with me!" and the tall man grabbed her arm so sternly it cut through the worn cloth of her jacket and dug into her arm as he dragged her forward. Pointing the flashlight away from her face for

the first time, he kicked away the desks and slammed his tall boots on the scattered crayons smashing all of them and leaving another texture of footprints in the dust on the floor.

Once outside, the flashlight was back on her. Who was she? What was she doing? And where were her papers? The lone Potty Patrol Officer demanded, and his commands floated around her head like the cloud of snow chaotically swirling. She could not think. She could not breathe. She could only softly cry at the consequences that now lay before her.

"Officer?" came a strong and confident voice she could not see from somewhere. "Officer?" And she could see the beam of his flashlight swing widely, "Oh thank God, you found her!" And from over the harsh, black shoulder, she saw a tall boy about her own age in a thick brown jacket and cloth cap. "Officer, this is my sister, and I thought I had lost her in the snow."

For once, the Potty Patrol looked puzzled. "Your sister?" he turned around and his scowl briefly turned into confusion. "Sister?"

"Yes, sir," The boy continued without hesitation. "I was taking her to the toilet line when she slipped in the snow." His red scarf moved with each word flapping in the wind. He had his hands out of his pickets and was explaining with a kind but slow hand motion, the finger-less gloves illustrating every point. "She slid in the slick ice, and I could not find her." He put his hands down by his side. "Thank God, you found her! She must have been frantically looking for me!"

The Officer still looked puzzled and skeptical but had begun the relent a little "She fell in the ice?" He was nodding a little, "Where was the ice?"

"I don't know sir," the boy pointed somewhere in the dark behind them all, "Back there somewhere?"

"I didn't see any ice." He was still puzzled, the shiny silver buttons in a line, "Where?"

The boy did not let him think, continuing on explaining how she slipped and slid and he could not see her and how he had

panicked in the cold and was so glad that the Officer had found her while the stern face started nodding a little along to the cadence of the story.

“And I will take her directly to the toilet line” the boy concluded and stood with what seemed relief.

The Officer paused for a second beneath his square hat and broad shoulders “You take her there this instant” he commanded as if it had been his own idea.

“Yes sir!” The boy put his hands on Meg’s shoulders and began to guide her. “Immediately, sir! Thank you, sir!” He led her back out onto the street and they quickly but demurely walked away.

Once they were a few blocks away, back towards the toilet line, the boy laughed. “Those Potty Patrol guys are kinda stupid sometimes,” and he chuckled.

Meg asked who he was.

“My name is John.” The boy smiled as they walked. “And you are Megan?”

“How... how did you know that?” She shivered.

The boy just laughed. “I was upstairs changing as I saw the whole thing. I saw you peek into that old classroom. I was wondering who you were. I thought maybe you were going to change too?” John narrowed his kind brown eyes in the snow. “There is an abandoned apartment across the street where I like to go change. The glass is not broken. I was by the window looking out when I saw you walk down the street.”

They kept walking. “Not gonna lie. I peed myself a little when I saw the Potty Patrol” And then the boy smiled again. “I saw him go in after you, so I quickly taped myself up. I ran after you. I heard you say Megan when I was coming down the stairs.” The snow was still there. Meg was shivering but the boy seemed immune. “I changed so fast I didn’t even use any powder.” And he laughed to himself.

“Why did you help me?” Meg timidly asked, afraid the boy would stop. She was shivering from the cold and the experience.

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"You seem nice," the boy said, and he put his arms around her to protect her from the cold. "That is hard to find." And for the first time, Meg smiled as she sunk into his warm arms.

They walked until they could see the toilet line.

"I'll leave you here, Megan." And the boy stood a few feet away.

"You can call me, Meg."

"Okay, Meg." He smiled and backed up a little to walk away. "Just be careful, okay, Meg? The Potty Patrol is everywhere." And he walked a step and a half before he turned and said, "You need to find a better place to change your diaper."

MEG MEETS TWO PEOPLE WHO WILL CHANGE HER LIFE

The last words that had come from his ruggedly handsome face had stopped her dead.

Change her diaper!

What an exciting and forbidden concept. Meg had never thought of that before. Diapers? She could wear diapers? All during school it froze her thoughts solid and arrested any participation in maths or reading or political thoughts and instead, she sat, cheerfully composed, next to Derek in his shiny new uniform.

"You see, Meg," Derek spun around a few times to show off his new black tunic, shiny black boots and pointed black hat. "It's the uniform of the Junior Potty Patrol"

Meg did have to admit that he did, indeed, look handsome, tall, and skinny though he was he had begun to put on a little more weight. The uniform was black and dark and did not have the typical shiny buttons to reflect the light. Those would come when he officially joined the Potty Patrol.

"I'll get my badge when I officially join. Usually, it takes about a year to become an official member of the potty patrol." He was still spinning merrily for Meg. "There is talk of speeding things up. I'm ever so eager." They both sat down at their brown faded desks once they had stood in rigid uniform and pledged, "The Potty is Power"

Meg thought of nothing but diapers for the whole class period and next. It bored into her mind while her outward face was one of placid obedience. In a System that demands rigid conformity and discipline with any infraction met with harsh physical punishment,

Meg had trained her mind, body, and face not to give away any hint of disloyalty or obtrusion.

It was during the short break between classes when Meg and Derek were sitting chatting, that Derek finally caught her attention. "We caught 7 more of them last night." Derek was still smiling in the few minutes before the next class. "Deviants."

Meg was slightly intrigued but did not sound excited. Her mind was elsewhere.

"You see, I've been training for the last week, and we've been going on patrols." Derek stated, "I've been paired up with an experienced officer, you see." He proudly began to adjust his new wool black tunic "We rounded up 7 more deviants."

Meg just nodded not getting distracted by her inner thoughts which were focused on diapers.

Derek continued. "They were all in groups of 2 or 3. Lazily hanging around the city, you see, instead of healthy activities." Derek and Meg were speaking low during their group assignment. It was math or something. "Some of them, you see, were actually wearing diapers!"

Meg stopped dead and looked at him for the first time. "Diapers?" She couldn't help but stare.

"I know!" Derek continued not noticing the change in Meg's demeanor. "Diapers! Can you believe it?"

Meg's heart was pounding.

"It was very interesting, you see." Derek was looking forward not paying attention to Meg or to the assignment they were supposed to be working on. Distractedly, he said "A few of them were just wearing diapers to skip the potty line, you see. I don't blame them, honestly. Those lines are ghastly, and they can be very expensive." Derek corrected himself quickly. "Not that I approve of such illegal behaviors, you see. I just understand where they are coming from."

Derek leaned in close to Meg who outwardly was working on the assignment. He whispered "The others, you see. They were ABDL."

Derek took his face back and nodded expecting to get a horrified reaction from Meg.

Meg was hanging on every breath and almost looked horrified. “ABDL?” She really looked intrigued, but Derek didn’t notice.

“Yes,” Derek explained helpfully as if he were reciting from a Potty Patrol book. “Adult Baby Diaper Lovers. They are the worst kind of traitors against the system. They wear diapers, you see, and they play with toys and sleep in cribs. They have little clothing and stuffed animals. They are the worst kind of rebels. You see, there is a secret underground headquarters called the Nursery where they plot to take down the System. They are wicked and evil. They go into a sort of trance called ‘Little Space’ where they plot and scheme to take down the Captain.” Derek shook his head a few times and then lit up into a beaming smile “Oh did I tell you, I may get to meet the Captain next week?” He was genuinely excited. “The Captain is coming to inspect our barracks, you see. Our group leader said the most outstanding cadets would get to meet him. I’ve gotten the highest marks so far, so that could be me!”

Meg just smiled and looked half hardheartedly down at the group project. Her mind wasn’t in it. Usually, it was Derek who copied off her. Normally she didn’t mind. If he didn’t copy, he would get terrible grades because he rarely paid attention. Somehow, he was good at Potty Patrol. Today, she was letting him do the work, her mind entranced with new exciting, and confusing emotions.

Little Space. Diapers. The Nursery.

What an exciting new rebelliousness. A whole world of exciting rebellion lurking just beneath the dark and grimy surface. While she wondered what “Little Space” was, she let Derek do all the assignments and they promptly failed.

Walking home after school on the cold snow-less day, Meg just looked in front of her at her feet and she was lost in thought. She didn’t notice the broken windows, the busted lights, the large Potty Power Posters and she also didn’t notice the two figures trailing her

from a distance. They followed her, these two together, all the way to the front door of her building.

Bouncing up her flights of stairs, Meg stopped for a minute to speak to kindly Mrs. Peterson and to wave at Little Joey playing on the floor, wearing only a diaper and a T-shirt. Mrs. Peterson kindly invited Meg in for tea, but she begged off. She had too much homework.

That wasn't a lie. In addition to the mounds of work she had piled on her desk, she had to redo the group assignment she and Derek had just failed. She knew she could ask Derek to redo it, but he was hopelessly lost at school and probably wouldn't do it right this time either. For some reason, Derek did poorly at school but seemed to excel at the Junior Potty Patrol. So she piled even more on her desk and went to work.

About halfway through someone inevitably dull and obtuse, Meg stopped and thought of Little Joey. There he was, happy and little, playing with his toy cars and stuffed baby beaver, and didn't have a care in the world. He didn't even have to worry about the potty. He just happily went in his diaper and was then lovingly changed by his mother. Meg was sure that Mrs. Peterson put as much love and kindness into Little Joey's diaper changes as she did everything, and Meg was suddenly envious. Maybe she wanted to be as loved and cared for as Little Joey. Maybe that was Little Space.

Meg leaned back on her bed and looked at the pile of books she had to do alone and for the first time in her life, she was truly miserable.

Meg didn't notice the two figures following her to school that next day but she certainly noticed on the way home. They were trailing her at a distance, but Meg saw that they stopped when she stopped. When she sped up, they sped up. And they turned when she turned. When she stopped suddenly to bend over and open her bag, she caught a glimpse of the two of them.

The man on the right was taller and wearing a brown jacket. She almost caught a glimpse of his face until some random frowning pedestrian pushed her and said a rude word. The woman on the left was shorter and was wearing a white sweatshirt. Meg only got a glimpse of light brown hair and bangs and round shiny glasses. Quickly zipping up her bag, Meg hurried along the street and the two shadowy figures did the same.

The Potty Patrol has agents everywhere and they would follow you looking for any sign of unorthodoxy. Or they could be random citizens, spying on each other. Hoping to turn Meg in for the reward money or the free use of the toilet. Meg quickly turned around the corner of a decaying apartment block and waited out of sight. She waited. She only had to wait about 30 seconds before the boy in the brown coat and the girl with the hair and round glasses turned to follow her into the Alley.

Meg jumped out with a flash and tried to run back to the street. The boy held up his hands with the finger-less gloves and desperately tried to stop her.

"Meg! Meg!" He began. "It's me. John. We met the other day." He was breathing hard but so was Meg.

Meg had still not caught her breath as John introduced her to Elle. She barely knew John but somehow trusted him while she didn't know Elle either she wasn't sure she trusted her at all. Maybe it was because John saved her a few days ago.

Elle certainly looked at her with skepticism and distance. Through her large round glasses under her light brown bangs, Elle looked wary. Her white sweatshirt with the little pink flowers went way down past her butt and legs and was very colorful and baggy. Meg noticed for the first time there was a little unicorn, pink and shiny, on the left breast as Elle smoothed out her top and tugged a little at the bottom. She spoke in short sentences.

"I'm Elle," was all she said.

Meg in the System

And John continued, "We saw you walking down the street. I thought I knew you. From the other day. Did you make it home okay? After the potty line?"

Meg nodded in assent. She was still a little shaken.

"We were going out for coffee. Elle and I thought you might want to come?"

Meg was still a little stunned but thought about it for a moment or so.

"Sure."

THE CHESTNUT TREE CAFE

Meg had never heard of the Chestnut Tree Cafe, but it looked homely and warm, hidden down a narrow backstreet. It wasn't visible from the main road, but it still seemed oddly close, like it had been tucked away on purpose and seemingly forgotten. The yellow brick on the front was old and worn like everything else, but the inside was clean, and each little table had a burning candle. These candles twinkled brightly even though the sun shone through the large windows and made everything seem light and happy.

After finding a small table through the moderate crowd, John went to go get drinks leaving Elle and Meg and his very large bag sitting lightly on the brown wooden chair. John went to the bar and cast a huge smile at the lady in the green apron behind. She was happy to see him. They talked for a few minutes while the lady with the black and gray hair placed steaming cups of coffee and a single tall glass of golden beer for John to collect and carry back to the table. Meg didn't say anything to Elle and Elle didn't say much to Meg. She sat there, looking around the cafe while Elle scrutinized her every move and up and down.

The warmth of the cafe circled around and through all of them. Meg took off her jacket, John removed his gloves, grabbing them by the palm and Elle rolled up her sleeves. As John, Meg, and Elle talked for a minute, Elle began to loosen up and speak more freely. She was almost the same age as Meg, and she attended a university on the other side of town that basically taught the same things. She brightened when Meg complimented her on her unicorn sweater.

"Thanks," said Elle. "I got it when John and I were out rummaging." She was almost bragging "We go out a lot. I have a small unicorn that matches."

Meg said that was cool, but her eyes were drawn to the shiny gold pin on the large swollen green backpack sitting on the chair. The giraffe was very happy and was yellow and was reflecting the candles and the sun. Even though it was small, the pin dominated the whole front of the blue bag, radically shining outwards and all around.

“Coffee or beer, Meg?” John asked as he began placing cups and glasses on the small round table. Meg said coffee while Elle reached out her soft pink hand to grab the chipped china of a coffee mug. John grabbed the beer and said, “I knew it.”

In response to Meg’s coffee, he began to sip the bright golden beverage. Meg asked how much it was, and John told her not to worry.

Elle began telling Meg about her and John’s adventures, which seemed nervous and enjoyable. They loved to go out looking around, finding whatever they could. Toys. Clothes. Food. Stuffies. Elle was particularly proud of the brightly colored bracelet she had found which was now circling around on her wrist.

When Elle put her arms on the table to softly grab her chipped mug of coffee, Meg noticed the scars. All of them. Long and thin and in neat parallel lines. They stood in stark uniform and marched all the way from the top of Elle’s wrist all the way up both forearms until they were hidden by her sleeves. Meg stared for a second and then Elle quickly and self-consciously rolled her sleeves back down and dropped her arms beside her and below the table. Meg embarrassingly grabbed her own coffee, looked at John, and took a deep gulp, finding that it was way too hot.

The three of them were similar to the other Cafe patrons in their verisimilitude. Groups of three or four were laughing and joking around small tables. John seemed to know some of them, and he would wave and say hi here and there. The cafe was clean and bright and colorful with little pictures on the wall, all expressive and colorful and there were plants and bottles all around near the windows and the brick wall.

Meg liked this place, but she got very happy when she saw a clear glass vase with a bouquet of paper flowers sitting upright and fulsome and she smiled because she remembered her own paper flower. There were very few pedestrians walking down this side street, but those who did were all solitary, bundled up in gray jackets and coats, bracing themselves from the wind that wasn't there. Those inside the cafe were warm and happy and all in groups together.

Meg asked John if the Potty Patrol ever came to the Cafe and he nodded. "Sometimes," he said between sips of his beer. "Checking to make sure no one is skipping the toilet line." John had a subtle caution that led Meg to trust him. "They kind of tolerate this place. People are miserable. They know it. So these little Coffee Shops act like a stress relief."

Elle moved her hand and white sleeve below the table to feel something, stood up slowly, and grabbed the large bag which seemed oddly light. "I'll be back," she said.

"Are you wet?" John asked.

Elle looked at Meg and then hesitated a little. "Yes," she finally answered. "I'll be right back."

John was unfazed "Do you need powder?"

"No," Elle said and nervously looked at Meg. "There's some in the bag." Elle grabbed the bag and effortlessly threw it over her right shoulder. The sweatshirt caught a little between the green straps. As she walked away, the little giraffe pin smiled at Meg.

John went back to his conversation earlier. He explained that the System knew that people were unhappy, so they tolerated little cafes and gatherings as a way to help people relieve some stress. "That's why you can always get beer and vodka. Let people have a little happiness." He himself chuckled a little as he took the last sip of his beer.

"Plus," Meg interjected. "Beer makes you pee. Use the potty more often."