



GIRL  
MINUS



ANNE  
STONE

A NOVEL

"Stone's brilliant, breathless novel will put readers in mind of  
Emily St. John Mandel and Margaret Atwood."

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

GIRL  
MINUS



**ΔLSO BY ΔNNE STONE**

*jacks: a gothic gospel*

*Hush*

*Delible*

**GIRL  
MINUS**



**ANNE  
STONE**

**A NOVEL**



A BUCKRIDER BOOK

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead; events or locales is entirely coincidental.

© Anne Stone, 2020

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from the Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For an Access Copyright license, visit [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca) or call toll free to 1-800-893-5777.

Buckrider Books is an imprint of Wolsak and Wynn Publishers.

Cover design: Michel Vrana  
Interior design: Jennifer Rawlinson  
Cover image: Tocarciuc Dumitru / istockphoto.com  
Author photograph: Hiromi Goto  
Typeset in Cambria and Virgo 01  
Printed by Rapido Books, Montreal, Canada  
Printed on certified 100% post-consumer Rolland Enviro Paper.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Canada Council  
for the Arts    Conseil des arts  
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario



BRITISH COLUMBIA  
ARTS COUNCIL



BRITISH  
COLUMBIA

Supported by the Province of British Columbia

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the BC Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Government of Canada.

Buckrider Books  
280 James Street North  
Hamilton, ON  
Canada L8R 2L3

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Girl minus X / by Anne Stone.  
Names: Stone, Anne, 1969- author.  
Identifiers: Canadiana 20200172387 | ISBN 9781989496114 (softcover)  
Classification: LCC PS8587.T659 G75 2020 | DDC C813/.54—dc23

*For Wayde & Senna (my loves).*



# **PART ONE**





## | CHAPTER 0 = X + 1

Dany can just make out the ruined rails of the roller coaster, its black bones rising into the sky. She knows better than to be here. Knows to leave well enough alone. Knows the smart thing to do is turn her back and say goodbye. She knows all of this, but it's not so easy letting go of those you love. So Dany takes one step and then another, huffing her way up the hill, as her kid sister falls behind.

When they crest the hill, she sees the whole of the prison. The old racetrack is girded by fences, each topped with razor wire. Where once were horses, she sees infected. Where once were grooms, she sees prisoners in orange jumpsuits. And watching over all of them, inside and out, military guards.

Below them, scattered across the face of the hill, a dozen little groups. The families of the women they've locked up inside. Some cluster around foam coolers, some sit on what scant grass can be found and some, she can tell, have given up on the visit. Laid out on old blankets, their faces are tuned to the clouds. Some, like her, have one eye on the prison-hospice. Dany is scanning the compound when the kid's tiny hand slips into hers. Tugs once, twice.

"Give me a sec," she tells Mac. Dany wants to see Aunt Norah, but there's no sign of their aunt. Not yet. But there, just inside the fence, Dany spots a chicken coop. Beside the coop, a half dozen

birds are stacked in tiny cages. Stunned and ragged, the birds shift on bony feet. In one of the cages, a bird lays dead. Its legs jut out, stiff as Popsicle sticks.

There's an old and stunted apple tree at the bottom of the hill. But it's not nearly tall enough, and besides, it's too far from the fence. But there, beyond the apple tree, she sees an enormous maple with leaves the size of dishrags. The maple is close to the fence, and a few of its branches arch up and over the barbed wire. Her eyes follow the largest branch, trace a path over the razor wire, make the ten-foot drop to the chicken coop's roof.

Again with the tugging, but Dany is looking at the racecourse – an oval track dotted with a hundred of the infected. More virals than she's ever seen together in one place.

Stick thin legs. Sallow skin. A strange human herd.

Only *herd* isn't the right word. Together like this, the infected don't move like any group of animals Dany's ever seen. They don't move like a crowd of people, either. Each viral's path is erratic. When she traces pathways over the track, she sees dark particles in a stirred glass. Atoms in Brownian motion. And then a picture of the virals lives in her mental album, too, for always, added to all of everything she's ever seen in the world.

At the centre of the field, a few virals stand with faces tipped to the sun, stumbling in slow circles. She takes in each of their faces, but none is familiar, or else all of them are, with that strange, waxen skin. On each yellow jacket a little metal clasp flashes when the viral hits six o'clock. Round and round they go, slowly spinning tops.

The virus, she knows, has left its mark on the brains of the infected. At this stage, the grey matter is riddled with tiny holes. The hypothalamus has shrivelled up like an old pea. And the cortex and medial temporal lobe are pitted with deep, unforgiving lesions. The virus causes all kinds of psychiatric symptoms. But that's not what gets to Dany. What gets to her is this: Once the disease has gone this far, the infected forget. They forget just about everything. They forget to even care. They forget friends and loved ones. They forget how to act. How to be. They forget

*who* to be. Looking out over the prison-hospice, Dany knows that the virals she sees are literally dying. But at this stage, people say, death hardly makes a difference.

And maybe one day none of this will matter. To anyone.

Maybe one day, if the virus infects enough people, they'll just run out of fence. If that day comes, the whole world will be a hospice. Maybe then, places like this will be reserved for the uninfected, the few who can't help but remember – themselves, the past, all the rest of what once was. Maybe one day it'll be Dany inside the fence.

The kid gives Dany's hand another yank. Only this time, the kid tugs so hard she nearly takes Dany's hand off at the root.

"Hey," Dany says. But looking down, she sees her sister's brown eyes, huge with need. Hungry. That's what the kid is. That's what they both are. Pretty much all the time, these days. "Lunch?" Dany asks with a yawn.

For a bright penny of a second, Dany thinks she's actually done it, that the kid is going to answer. For a moment, Mac's big brown eyes fix on Dany. Like a goldfish, that little mouth opens. But with a final yank, the kid lets go and stomps off towards the apple tree.

| | |

They picnic under the apple tree, in spite of the mud, in spite of the smell. This close to the fence, the smell of shit and bleach is overpowering. By the time Dany has taken her first bite, her kid sister, sandwich in pocket, has abandoned their muddy blanket.

The kid monkeys her way halfway up the trunk and clings to it, looking down at Dany. Blinking expectantly. Slowly, Dany rises and makes her way to the trunk, giving the kid a leg up. Mac settles herself in a nook, pulls her glass-eyed doll out of her backpack. The kid takes tiny bites of her sandwich, offers it to the doll, the two small figures framed by a clutch of scrawny buds. She looks sort of peaceful up there, in that gnarled old knot of a tree. Nesting there, among the apple buds, the kid almost looks safe. But then, kids fall out of trees all the time. Break arms. Dislocate elbows. An unlucky kid might even crack a skull.

The letter the prison sent Dany said this would be a picnic.

But there are no birds or dragonflies. No pond for her sister to skip stones into. Just a balding hill, with more bare spots than grass. And spread out across the rounded side of the hill, a dozen tiny groups – families, friends, the people who belong to the women locked up with the infected inside. All around the hill, swirling and settling on each of their skins, the sounds and smells of dying virals.

Only it isn't virals dying inside of the hospice, not really. It's people. Isn't it?

Maybe not legally, not anymore, but Dany knows it.

They're people still.

| | |

On the highway, eighteen-wheelers kick up clouds of dust and ash-laden smoke drifts out of the prison-hospice. Soon, every last bit of her is covered in a film of grit. The stench of the place licks at Dany's clothes and seeps into her bread sandwich. Still, she's hungry, and she isn't going to let a little soot get in the way.

As she eats, Dany watches the yard.

On the other side of the fence, pair by pair, a group of prisoners gather up. It's not possible to pick her aunt out of the bunch. Not at this distance. Not when all of their faces are grey with sweat and ash.

As she waits, Dany digs into her backpack, pulls out a pair of books.

The first is a primer on security systems and cryptography. The other, a coil-bound photocopy of a prison guard manual, courtesy of Antoine. Between each page she reads, Dany scans the compound. Finally, it's her aunt's name in the guard's mouth. Finally, her aunt Norah is standing on the other side of the fence and there's a spot for Dany and the kid, down by the red rope, just opening up.

"Hey, Mac," Dany shouts and, without waiting, makes her way down.

| | |

There, on the other side of that red rope, past the scabble of bare dirt that is the no-go zone, past the chain-link fence, stands Aunt Norah and another prisoner, the two chained at the wrist. Dany takes in her aunt's orange jumpsuit. The suit is covered in filth, and the ankles and cuffs are practically black. On her chained wrist, the fabric is threadbare and worn. Slowly, the chain is wearing holes into the suit. Into their lives. Into everything.

The rope might only put a few extra feet between Dany and her aunt, but that little whisper of distance changes everything. The red rope puts an end to quiet talk. Outlaws affection. Next to the highway, like this, Dany will have to yell just to be heard.

But what Dany has come to say can't be shouted.

Some words can't be said that loud. Some words can barely be said out loud at all. Dany studies the vacant-eyed guards, there, at either end of the red rope like a pair of stupid bookends. But one look and she knows. The guards they've posted out here might be bored out of their skulls, but they're taking it in. They're listening, hard.

When Dany finally looks at Norah's face, her aunt is looking past Dany, searching the hillside. "Where's Mac," Norah asks, but her voice is barely audible over the traffic. "Where is she?" she calls. Louder this time.

Dany nods back at the apple tree and, glancing down at her aunt's mud-caked boots, she takes in that chain. The chain will be a problem. A three-foot-long problem, to be exact; one that binds Norah to the gap-toothed redhead beside her. Dany adds one three-foot-long metal chain to her mental list.

The prisoner with the bottle-red hair, meanwhile, is making herself heard too. And beside Dany – so close that when the wind shifts, she can smell her – a musty old woman is cussing. Working herself up. Words hurtle through the air all around Dany. And beneath it all, like a river, she hears the muttering of the infected and the low groans of passing trucks.

"Dany," her aunt is saying. "Hey, honey, look at me. Focus."

Dany's eyes find the red rope. The fence. The outline of her aunt behind it.

"Where's your papa?"

Dany frowns.

She doesn't know why Norah cares about Antoine so much. After all, everything is Antoine's fault. Pretty much everything that's ever gone wrong for Dany can be traced back to Antoine, one way or another. If Norah hadn't gotten involved with Antoine, her aunt would still be at home. Still cleaning houses. They'd be hungry, sure, they'd be having a hard time making one end meet the other, but they'd be together. Now, thanks to Antoine, Dany and her aunt are screwed. "I'm an orphan," she says with a shrug.

"Jesus," her aunt says. "Can you let it go?" Norah shakes her head and takes a deep breath. When she tries again, she clasps the fence, as if she needs something to hold her up. "Look, where's Antoine?" she asks.

But Dany shrugs the question off.

She has so much to tell her aunt. There's so much to work out between them. She glances at the closest guard. Focuses on his heavy black boots. But she can feel it. A pair of cold blue eyes shift in their sockets, take her in. Dany draws in a quick breath, glances back at her aunt.

"Talk to me," her aunt is saying. "Where are you staying?"

Dany shrugs again. "Home," she says.

"Antoine's farm. You two are at the farm?"

Dany shakes her head, no. Shrugs.

And everything falls to pieces. Because there, in the yard, just behind her aunt, the world has gone topsy-turvy. A fight has broken out. Or worse. Dany nods her chin at the ruckus just behind Norah.

Norah turns, and her whole body tenses up. Because there, in the prison yard behind her aunt, the group of waiting prisoners has parted – moving back in a loose circle – drawing an anxious ring around a pair of prisoners. At first, Dany thinks the woman has been hurt and that's why she's screaming. Screaming and tugging at her chain. But when Dany traces the chain to the other end, she sees the real problem.

There, lying on the ground, a prisoner is face down in the muck. Her face half buried in the foul stuff. Her head is wildly thrashing. Above her, the other prisoner is yanking on the chain that binds them – trying to get away. She yanks so hard that the prone woman's arm pops right out of its socket.

All around them, the world has gone quiet.

And in that quiet, Dany hears the sound of bone, dislodged. Hears sinew, tearing. An echo of it there, in her head. For always. And ever.

Norah takes one step back. And another. Presses her back against the fence, dividing her jumpsuit into small orange diamonds. But Aunt Norah has hit the hard limit of her world. There's nowhere for her to go.

Dany takes in the prisoner, face down in the yard, thrashing. She knows what an epileptic seizure looks like. But this is no ordinary seizure – no, this is something worse. Dany studies the prone prisoner, there, convulsing in the muck. Jasper, her biology mentor at the lab, would see it too. One look and he'd see it. This woman is sick. Something has shorted the circuits in her brain. Dany tries to get a look at the prisoner's eyes, her pupils, but, with all that thrashing, it's impossible. As she watches, she feels her little sister's hand glide into hers. Feels tiny fingers gripping her own, falling slack, gripping again, as the kid's huge eyes take all of it in.

A shrill alarm splits the air and, for a long beat, Dany forgets all about her mentor.

Forgets the woman, seizing up in the muck.

Forgets her aunt, back pressed to the fence.

Forgets everything, except that tiny hand in hers.

| | |

For a long time, the air screams, and when the screaming stops, when all is quiet, Dany's ears ring with an echo of the alarm.

Before her, the rope trembles. The guards, on either end, have unclasped the hooks. As she watches, the red rope drops to the ground, lifeless, a skinned snake. Dany grips her sister's tiny hand, grips it hard.



The closest guard turns on Dany and the kid, taking the two of them in. His hand hovers over his baton before settling on his belt buckle. He leans in. "Go on," he tells her. "Get out of here."

Dany grabs up her backpack and takes hold of her sister's hand. But the kid's feet are planted in the earth. "We've got to go," Dany tells her. "Now." But the kid just stands there, staring past the fence, at the outline of her aunt.

Dany follows Mac's gaze, takes one last look.

She gets it, she does. Her little sister wants their aunt to face them, to acknowledge them one last time. To hold up a single hand. To wave. To let them know she'll be okay. But the guard shifts his hand, takes hold of his baton.

"Move," Dany hisses. She tugs on that little arm and the kid stumbles forward a step. And then Mac just stands there, again, staring up at Dany out of bottomless eyes.

"Aunt Norah will be okay," Dany tells her. "She can handle herself."

The guard steps forward, eyes on Dany.

"We're going," Dany says and pulls. But the kid is a square wheel, so Dany has no choice. She drags her sister away. Time and again, the kid squirms from her grip and, turning back, fixes big eyes on the yard. Another need as insistent as hunger has taken hold.

"She'll be okay, I swear."

The kid looks up, searches Dany's face.

"I swear," Dany whispers. "I've got a plan. I promise. I will get Norah out."

| | |

Back at home, Mac goes for the Scrabble box. The kid gives the box a shake and stares up at her sister.

But Dany looks from the game to their ancient answering machine. The dusty black box is analogue. Inside, there is a tiny compartment to hold a little tape cassette. The thing belonged to Antoine – who is seriously paranoid about digital technology. On the black box, a little light blinks red.

Dany knows it will be bad news – because it’s always bad news – but she hits the button anyway. On the inside of her chest, there’s this tiny whisper of hope that refuses to die. The little whisper is telling her that maybe Eva called. Maybe Eva is on her way over.

But the first message is from the phone company. Not only are landlines being permanently phased out, but their bill is past due. Dany hits the button again, and the tape skips forward. The machine blips and there, from that dusty plastic box, comes the voice of a tired old man.

“Danielle, mon chou, it’s me, it’s papa,” the voice on the machine says. The kid sets down the Scrabble box and stares, head cocked.

Dany frowns.

“You’re mad. I understand.” Antoine sighs, and for a beat, there is the sound of his tired breaths. “Can you tell Mac there’s going to be chicks?” he tries. “Four, five days more, I think. Maybe she wants to come see the baby chickens hatch. Maybe you both want to come and see. I’ve fixed up rooms for both of you. You know that I –”

Dany hits the button and the machine shuts off. But too late. The kid is looking up at her, eyes bright. She’s heard it all. With a sigh, Dany reaches for the phone. “I’ll call, I’ll call,” she tells Mac. “Stupid chickens.”

But the kid is grinning.

Dany picks up the phone and frowns. Taps on the little button. But when she holds the receiver to her ear, there’s no dial tone. No nothing. Just a dead hunk of plastic. Because they’ve finally done it. Cut the landline off.

She holds the telephone out to her little sister and shrugs.

## | CHAPTER 0 = X + 2

She doesn't know if it's the failed visit, Antoine's call or the dead telephone. Maybe it's the long session of failed Scrabble, in which the kid breaks all of Dany's simple words into random bits of sound. What is *mo* and *cu* and *ga* supposed to mean, anyway? She doesn't know what does it – but that night, sleep takes a long, long time to come.

For what feels like a hundred years, Dany lays there, staring at the popcorn ceiling over their bed. She thinks about their file, sitting on a desk at the ministry. At some point, somebody will figure out that they're on their own. And then there's the rent she can't pay. She pictures the chickens at the prison-hospice, the ones who woke one day in a cage inside of a jail. She thinks of the rats at the lab, the half-empty shelves at the food bank and the prisoner who went down, thrashing. Her arm half out of its socket. As Dany stares at the little spikes of stucco, her mind is an unhappy Ping-Pong ball, and the little stucco spikes are like needles in her eyes.

A second later, an hour later, a million years gone – Dany doesn't know – but she's up with a start, clawing at the twisted comforter. Her heart skitters and skips, and her breaths come in tiny gasps. Dawn is bleeding through the threadbare sheet they use as a curtain.

But she is here, Dany tells herself. She is here, and here is home.

Dany tears the coverlet off her arms, freeing herself. But for a long time, she looks at that sun-faded sheet. Traces each stain and tear. Wrapping her arms around her chest, she breathes, and the fingers of her nightmare slowly loosen their grip.

Still, the feeling of the dream is slow to die.

Dany takes in her small room, in all its solid reality.

She makes herself look at her dresser, take in each chip in the paint. *Two, three, five.* She makes herself look at the wall beside her bed, smudged with dozens of tiny Mac-size handprints. *Seventeen, nineteen, twenty-three.* And all the while, she runs her primes. *Forty-seven, fifty-three, fifty-nine.* But best of all, for grounding, are those tiny feet, ice-cold and insistent, the ones digging into her side.

Best of all, always and forever, is Mac.

Dany cups her sister's little feet in her hands. She huffs, warming Mac's frozen toes. A moment later, the kid twitches awake. She sits straight up, clutching at her doll, and blinks at Dany out of sleep-drunk eyes.

"School day," Dany tells her, and Mac shuts her eyes. Falling back against the pillow, the kid pulls the comforter over her head.

"No way, not today," Dany says. "I've got lab." She tugs at the thick blanket, but her sister grips the thing in her little fists. "Look, get up now and I'll taxi you in to breakfast."

The cover slides down and Mac's wide-awake eyes blink out at her.

Dany's been played.

| | |

Without her aunt to help, mornings are a bit much for Dany. There's the hassle of getting the kid into clothes, there's the worry of breakfast. This morning, Dany shakes the last of the powdered milk into a glass of water, stirs and pours the translucent liquid into a bowl of sugar puffs. When the kid looks at the milk, eyebrows raised, Dany shrugs and tells her it's skim.

Finally, they're both ready to go.

Mac has her sneakers on, the ragged laces tied off in knots, and all Dany needs to do is get the nose plug on the kid. But it's the same every day. A monumental struggle. Some mornings, the kid hides her face in her hands. Some mornings, she stares at Dany's nose, a look of utter betrayal on her face. Today, as soon as Dany's back is turned, the kid vanishes into the closet – and when Dany opens the door, Mac is buried under the pile of old coats.

Dany shakes her head. You'd think, with the fuss Mac made, that Dany was trying to shove the plug *up* her nose.

"Look, I know it bugs you," Dany tells the squirming coat pile. "And I know it pinches, but it has to, if it's going to work." Dany gets it. She knows why Mac is upset. Mac's the only kid who goes to kindergarten with a nose plug on. Some of the kids wear N95 masks and some show up in old dust masks. A few have home-made cotton jobs. And at least a quarter of the kids wear nothing at all. Dany's seen it all, but she knows science and what's more, she knows kids. The plug will work better on a five-year-old than any oversize mask.

"You know why it's important," she tells the kid. "I told you how the virus works." Dany pauses, and looks at the plug. "Besides, this isn't an ordinary nose plug. It's magic."

The coat pile shifts.

"Did I ever tell you about the girl who could breathe underwater? She gave me this plug, so I could breathe underwater, like her." Dany rests her hand on an old coat, tells it the whole story. How, a long time ago, there were things called swimming pools. How pools were pretty much like bath tubs, abandoned by giants. How a single swimming pool could hold all of the kids at Mac's school and more. How sometimes, if you were very lucky, in the deep end, you might find a little mermaid, who'd slipped in among the human children.

The coat pile shifts again and this time Dany can see a dark pair of eyes peering out at her.

"Back then," Dany tells her, "everyone wanted one of these." Dany holds the plug up, examining it like a pearl. "This one was hers," Dany says softly. "And it's special. Really special. You know what, I bet it still works."

Dany starts to put it on her own nose. From the coat pile, a tiny hand reaches out and takes the plug from her.

| | |

But the hassles don't end with the nose plug.

Because across the hall, outside of Kuzmenko's unit, she sees the same garbage bag as she saw the day before. The air in the hall stinks. Dany shakes her head and grabs the bag. And worse, when they head into the stairwell, the only light bulb has been smashed to bits. Frowning, Dany abandons the garbage bag on the landing.

She pulls out her stainless steel water bottle, grips it by the neck. The bottle is full and the weight of it feels good in her hand. If someone bothers them, a full water bottle will crack a skull. Theoretically.

"Keep close," she tells her kid sister, and Mac does.

The kid doesn't like the dark, but Dany knows better. You don't have to worry about the dark. Worry about the people who use the dark. Her whole life is a dark stairwell. One misstep, a bit of bad luck, and it's all over for them.

She isn't worried about the sixteen-year-old boy on the third floor, the one who probably smashed the light bulb in the first place. He lives with his cousin, a parole officer with two pit bulls, and she worries less about him than the clothes he steals from the laundry room. Some days he steals underwear, some days he smashes light bulbs and some days he scatters thumbtacks in the hall. *That boy is the Eastside weather*, her aunt used to say, but that was a long time ago. And then there are the street kids he runs with, a pack of hairless wolves. Eyes as cold as stones. Dany wonders if her own eyes look like dead rocks, too, after the places she's been.

But the worst of all is the Ministry of Child Services and all the places they can put you in. Because to get in trouble is to risk being sent back. And no matter what happens, she can *never* go back there again.

| | |

When the two reach the bottom landing, Dany cracks open the door and peers out.

There, in the blinding light of the alleyway, she sees her.

A kid. A little kid who's somehow fallen down next to the dumpster.

Dany takes a couple of steps towards the girl before she realizes how perfectly still she is. Too still. And then she sees it. The girl is made of plastic. The doll's matted hair, like Mac's, sticks up at all angles.

Only the doll's not a doll. She's a message. A message aimed directly at Dany. Someone wants to tell her something. Needs to tell her something. So, no, she doesn't even notice that Mac isn't holding her hand anymore. All she sees is the doll and then the woman, the one wheeling her shopping cart around the dumpster. And before she knows what's happening, the kid has bolted.

Her little sister runs fast, but Dany – seeing the woman's face – is, for a long beat, held in place by those eyes. Then Dany, too, breaks away, long loping strides. She scoops the kid up into her arms just before Mac hits the street. A car horn blares, her heart pounds and the kid reels.

Her kid sister is trembling, her little arms shaking.

Still, Dany can't help it. She turns back.

Behind them, the woman has wheeled her shopping cart up to the dumpster. In the cart, there are picture frames, bits of bric-a-brac. The debris of a broken life. The woman plucks up the doll from the trash and settles it in the front seat of her cart, stiff legs poking through the bars like a taxidermied child. Dany takes in the cart – sees the doll, surrounded by half-familiar odds and ends. She's seen the woman around before. Too many times to be by chance. But today, for the first time, she notices the picture. The framed photograph in the woman's cart. But it hurts to look at it, and she wants to turn away.

Is the woman infected? Dany can't say. But there aren't any obvious signs. If this woman is infected, over time, the virus will colonize her brain. And day by day, the light in her will dim, consciousness will dim, until the day comes that someone glances at

her in passing and sees that there is no pilot light left. No one on the inside of those eyes. They'll call her in to the medicos.

She won't have much of a life.

There are outbreaks of typhus on the streets, and lately, Dany's been hearing about a new strain of cholera. Most people give no thought to the street people they see. But Dany does. Every time she sees this woman, she asks herself who she is, if she has family. And even if she hadn't seen the photograph in her cart, Dany would know the answer. This woman had a family. This woman had kids. *Has* kids. Two of them. Girls.

In her arms, Mac is trembling.

Dany holds her sister tight. Slowly, she raises her eyes to take in the woman's face.

The woman's staring back at her and, for an instant, Dany could swear it was there. A flicker of recognition. There, in the woman's eyes.

But when Dany looks again, two empty dark pools stare back at her.

Maybe the woman is slipping away. Maybe she is losing the last of herself. Maybe it's the virus. Maybe it's a more ordinary kind of loss. In a way, it doesn't much matter. All Dany knows is that looking into the woman's eyes is like looking into a black hole, where the future is void. Looking at her, Dany too is sliding into a dark nothing. Not even the terminal cases, out at the hospice, scare Dany. Not like this. The woman is a glass with a crack, slowly draining down.

"Go home," she whispers. Only, when her mouth forms the words, Dany feels a crack open up inside of her, too. The kind of crack all kinds of things can leak out of.

Mac slips from her arms, turns to clutch at her, shaking her. The kid wants Dany to move.

And all at once, Dany breaks away.

She turns from the woman and takes her kid sister in. Feels the warmth of the kid's hands on her arm, sees her panic. Lets Mac fill all of her mind.

"You and me, we're okay," she tells her. "We're okay."



Taking her little sister by the hand, Dany turns her back on the woman. And together, they walk away.

| | |

At the elementary school, security is just finishing up. Dany watches the guards hustle the last few addicts and homeless from the school doorway and waits, as janitorial sprays the steps down with disinfectant.

If Dany's mentor at the lab is right, among the street people, impossible to detect at the early stages, are infected. How many, no one can say. But if Jasper's right, the virus is responsible for more than the upswing in viral encephalitis cases. The virus is responsible for the huge increase in psychiatric cases and homeless, too.

Some people watch birds, ticking off exotic names in little red books.

Dany watches the virus. Looking for patterns in the noise.

Only now, because of what Jasper's taught her, Dany watches everyone.

| | |

There are maybe a dozen kids in Mac's kindergarten class. Most people home-school little kids – because nobody wants to send small children to a public school, not now. They're too small to take basic precautions. Mac's classmates are the kids with no other option.

Miss Papadopoulos spots them in the doorway, raises an eyebrow, and Dany sees it too: the tangle of Mac's hair, the kid's dirty fingernails. The teacher nods at the sink.

Dany takes the kid over and carefully washes Mac's hands up to the elbow. She runs her fingers through Mac's wild hair, but the kid shrugs her off and heads to the cubbies. Together, they settle Mac's glass-eyed doll in the little wooden box.

Dany bends down, putting herself level with her sister's eyes. "I'll be here for you at three," she says and swipes again at Mac's frizzy locks.

Mac dodges her. When her little sister straightens up again,

her gaze is focused on some distant universe, a speck of a place, thousands of light years past Dany's shoulder.

"I love you times a million," Dany says. "Times a googolplex." She kisses one finger and touches the tip of the kid's nose. Smiles. But that look, that thousand-mile stare, it just makes Dany sad, impossibly sad.

Then she sees it: the worst of her morning is yet to come. Because there, at the door to the classroom, Mac's teacher is waiting to have a word.

On her way out, Dany stops by the door and frowns at the scuffed tile floor.

"Your sister took the motor to pieces last week," Miss P is saying, "the one that ran the filter of our fish tank." And Dany can't help it, she grins. "Killing half the salmon fry," Miss P finishes, and Dany's smile dies.

When she glances up, the teacher's lips are pressed in a thin line of disapproval. Dany tries to find an answer to that tight frown, but all she's got is a shrug. "Did you look it up?" she finally asks. "The thing I told you about."

"Einstein syndrome," the teacher says and sighs. "Just tell your aunt to call me."

| | |

Dany scuff-walks the tiled hallway, eyes cast down.

But the worry follows after her. Trails her through two bus transfers, stalks her on the long walk across campus. By the time she lets herself into the university lab, she can feel the whole of child services half a breath behind. She feels the beginning of it, too – a truly awful headache. All of the forces in the world have lined up like dominoes, poised to come crashing down on their heads.

She knows what causes the headaches. Stress.

Dany tells herself not to worry. Because she doesn't need to worry.

Eva says that they both have it made.

At the beginning of the year, Dany placed first on the district tests for math and the biological sciences. Eva came in second. That's how they got their places at the BioGENEius project – at the university lab. Two days each week Dany's at the lab and the rest of the time she's in special classes at the micro-school.

"We'll definitely get full scholarships," Eva always says. Not that Eva needs one. Besides, on her bad days, like today, Dany can't see how university is possible. Even with funding. The promise feels surreal. Like a tornado's promise to deliver her to the Land of Oz. What's she supposed to do with her little sister? Put her in a bicycle basket? Cart her along to physics lectures?

No. It'll never happen. Besides, Dany doesn't need university. What she needs is to adopt Mac. What she needs is to *be* eighteen.

Dany doesn't need a scholarship. What she really needs is a lifetime supply of cheese and noodles and a time machine.

## | CHAPTER 0 = X + 3

Dany cards her way into the lab. On her mind: the prison-hospice, her aunt, the Ministry of Child Services, the empty cupboards in her kitchen, the two months of rent past due, the poetry exam in English Studies on Friday, the food bank closing early today and worse, the oral presentation she has to give tomorrow, with Liz Greene, in spite of the fact that Dany does not *ever* open her mouth in class . . .

Dany lays her forehead against the cold locker door, lets the cool seep into her brain. Screwed. With her aunt locked up, that's what she is. Entirely, endlessly, screwed. For half a second she thinks of Antoine – *Papa*, he called himself. Anger tightens her chest and Dany shuts the thought down right there.

She runs through her padlock combo, *eighteen, twenty-nine, forty-seven*, shoves her bag in and twirling the lock shut, heads into the lab.

| | |

Dany passes a dozen researchers without so much as a nod. She makes a beeline for Jasper. As usual, his keyboard looks like it's about to be buried under an avalanche of research papers and old candy wrappers.

Under the fluorescent lights, she makes out the peppering of grey in his tightly coiled black hair. Then, glancing down, she

sees the biologist's hands, curled like crabs on the keyboard. His fingers dance over the keys.

Here, at this desk, everyone but Jasper fades like background noise.

In Dany's book, Jasper is okay.

Jasper is the one who taught her how to hold a test tube properly. Now, she can grip the tube and remove its cap with the fingers of the same hand. He lent her a book about Harry Harlow and monkeys and wire-and-cloth mothers – about trauma and the human brain. And just last week, he showed her how to do Yates's correction. Now her P values are tighter than her high school math teacher's.

At the BioGENEius lab, variables don't lurk in stairwells. Here, variables are neatly contained in equations and controlled. At least, all except for the virus – which nothing can contain or control.

Jasper nods at a pair of take-away cups, but doesn't raise his eyes from the screen.

"Thanks," Dany says and takes a sip. A half a beat later, she's swearing. A mouthful of sugary tea sprays across the papers on his desk. Still, Dany can't help but smile. "You want some tea with your sugar?" she asks him.

Jasper absently dabs at the papers with a tissue. "What can I say? Sweet tooth." He glances at her. "Yours is the other one."

Dany turns the other cup, sees her initials and takes a sip. Synth, black, just the way she likes it. Dany glances at her mentor. But today, Jasper looks different. Stress lines have settled in by the corners of his mouth. Finally, Jasper pushes his chair back from the computer. As he faces her full on, she drops her gaze.

"I've got good news and bad," he tells her. "Start with the good?"

Jasper tries to catch her eye, but Dany takes in his shoes – those old beaten sneakers he wears, day after day, and that never look like they'll last out the hour. His shoes put the faint scent of gym locker in the air. That and Lysol.

"Well, take a look," he says, nodding at his computer screen.

Dany glances again at the screen, but what she sees is a lonely planet, suspended in a strange liquid. Only, no, this is no planet . . .

"So, that's it?"

"Well, this," Jasper says, "is in its own way both good news and bad."

"The virus is good news?" Dany asks.

"No, not exactly," Jasper says. "We isolated this from an outbreak at the hospice. So, what you're seeing is a mutation in the virus, a new strain. Maybe we'll be the ones to name it."

Dany's heart skips a beat and she turns to the screen once more. But the thing is tiny. A little bumpy sphere, like a meteor or a rocky moon. Jasper gives over the keyboard and Dany adjusts the image. For a second, it's almost as if she is looking at an ovum, a human egg. Dany glances from his screen to the wet lab. There, in a glove box, she can see the digital microscope he's hooked up. Still, the whole thing makes her nervous. As if the *idea* of the virus is enough to infect her.

"It's hard to imagine," she says. "I mean, how such a tiny creature can . . . unmake a person, like, unmake a world."

But Jasper corrects her. While some argue that a virus is alive, Jasper believes that a virus is a thing, no different from a chair or rock or soup ladle. "A virus," Jasper tells her, "is just a bunch of molecules – that's it. It's about as capable of acting on the world as a wooden leg. I know some scientists argue differently but –"

"Aren't we just bunches of molecules, too?" she asks.

"Think of it this way. Unlike us, a virus is at the complete mercy of its environment."

As far as that goes, Dany and the virus have something in common.

Dany adjusts the focus, makes the virus grow so large that it takes up most of the screen. As the image sharpens, the scope's focus finds the sweet spot and she gets her first real look at the thing. Binding proteins blossom like tiny mushrooms on its surface. Dany feels odd. She lays her hands flat against the desk to steady her gaze. A strange vertigo overtakes her. She isn't afraid

of falling, exactly, but afraid that something in her *wants* to fall. Looking at the virus, she is Alice, peering down a rabbit hole. The virus sings, *You're late for tea*.

"Viruses are amazing," Jasper says. "Tiny microscopic miracles." And he tells her that the human placenta evolved from a virus. "Imagine that, the placenta, a two-pound viral envelope."

"Um, yeah, I'd rather not," Dany says, and flicks her gaze from the microscope feed to his shirt, the one peeking out from the folds of his lab coat. *IX IN AI*, she reads, but his coat obscures the rest of it.

"Don't get me wrong. The brain is amazing, too," Jasper tells her. "All of it, imagine – all feelings, all trauma, all memory – the work of tiny electric pulses. All of you, heart and soul, just a bunch of flickering light bulbs. Amazing, right?"

Dany doesn't need to look at the feed to see it. Her mind has taken a perfect, precise photograph. As she looks at Jasper's hands, she calls up the image of the broken light bulb in the stairwell. She sees the prison's red rope, like a skinned snake. But then her mind leaps to this new thing, this new idea about the brain.

"I sing the body electric," Dany says. A line from the poem she is supposed to write about in her English Studies exam on Friday. Does it help to know this thing about the brain? Does it? Does it help to know that all of her bad memories are just a bunch of electrical pulses? That all of her memories, like her night terrors, are really just flickering light bulbs?

Yeah, no, it doesn't.

She tunes out Jasper then. Peering at the computer, she nods in understanding. There, in the perfectly detailed image, she finds the knowledge she's come here for. Each person's mind possesses an off switch, a fatal breaker. A *just-in-case*. And this virus – which has as much right to call itself a creature as she does – knows the trick of it. "So, can I go into the hospice?" Dany asks, her eyes on the virus. "Like, to be part of the field study with you?"

She's been working up to this question for weeks. But yesterday, when she saw the sick prisoner at the hospice, the question became urgent. She *has* to get in. She has to. Soon.

The study will take her *inside* of the prison-hospice. Jasper doesn't know about her aunt, imprisoned there. So he has no reason to say no. If she gets in, she can find a way to talk to Aunt Norah. Together, they can make a plan.

But Jasper only sighs.

She feels his eyes on her. Though her eyes are on his lab coat, she can see the subtle shake of his head. "I don't think it's a good idea, not under the best of conditions," he tells her. "Sure, it's a hospice, but it's a *prison*-hospice, Dany." He shakes his head and stress lines reappear around his mouth.

Still, that isn't a no.

But Jasper pauses, looks at her.

She senses it, there's something more – something he doesn't want to tell her. Dany narrows her eyes and looks at the research papers strewn on the desk, sips at her synthetic coffee. "I can handle jail," she says with a shrug. This won't be her first prison visit. Not by a long shot. She's grown up visiting prisons – Antoine's made sure of that. "I'm cleared," she tells him. "I got myself put on the visitor list."

Jasper turns to her sharply, and Dany studies the stubble on his chin.

She shrugs again. "It's just paperwork."

"Look, even if Isobel did say yes," he says and holds up a hand, "which she won't, the prison admin would never allow it – not now. There's an outbreak at the hospice. It hasn't affected the patients, the ones who have the original strain, but it's been burning through the staff. It's too dangerous. So, no. Not now."

Dany looks at Jasper, the tiny frown lines around his mouth. He looks . . . more than worried. He looks afraid. And that makes Dany afraid, too. She doesn't want to think about her aunt being stuck in a place so dangerous that Jasper is scared to go there. Dany pictures the prisoner she saw the day before, the one thrashing on the ground. Infected. The prone prisoner was infected with the new strain.

Version 2.0.

"Okay," Dany says slowly, her mind ticking over. "I can't come with you. But I can ask questions, right? I can read field reports?"



Jasper nods.

“So, is this the bad news?” she asks. Dany takes in Jasper’s mouth. The tight lines. On his forehead, a little vein throbs.

“Not quite,” Jasper says. His seat rotates, and he takes Dany in. “There’s been a small change with the timing of your experiment,” he tells her. “We’ve had to reschedule.”

“You promised,” she says flatly. “Today. We’re going to do it today.”

Jasper holds up his hands. “It’s just temporary. That’s all. Just a small delay. We’ll be moving the new virus over to the BSL-4 lab soon, really soon. That virus needs to be in a better wet lab. Honestly, if we’d had any idea, we’d have never brought the sample here . . . But until then? I’m sorry, no wet lab access.”

She looks from that throbbing vein to the virus. It’s easier to hear him when she’s looking away from him, focusing on a screen.

“We’ll still practise,” Jasper tells her. “We’ll get you in the blue suit and do a dry run. We can use the rat house.”

“So,” she says, “no wet lab, no hospice. But even if I can’t go in, I can ask questions, right?”

Jasper, with a look of relief, nods.

But his relief first fades and then dies as Dany’s questions – more or less a bazillion of them – unfurl in his general direction.

| | |

Dany stares at Jasper’s teacup. Barely touched, his tea is an ice-cold supersaturate. Add a grain of sugar, and the crystals will drop out of liquid form, leaving a heap of sweet at the bottom of his cup. When she asks him about the yellow plague jackets, her eyes are on that cold, sugar-soaked tea.

Yesterday, at the so-called picnic, Dany saw the terminal cases wearing their yellow jackets – but she caught sight of something more. A glint of metal. The image came back to her the night before. The little metal hinge flashed in her dream.

“What’s the metal thingie, on the jackets?” she asks.

Jasper pauses, halfway out of his chair. Turns to take her in. Something in her tone has caught him, because Jasper sits

back down. She can feel his eyes on her, taking her in. Jasper is thoughtful that way. He takes the time to be aware of the effect his words have on a person, because you never know who the person next to you has lost or how.

“The plague jackets are devilishly clever,” he tells her. “They lock in place.”

They are alone right then. Dany doesn’t think he’d ask otherwise.

“This isn’t about my field study, is it?”

Dany frowns and, looking at his fingers, shakes her head once. “Just tell me how the lock works,” she tells him. “I need to understand.” At this point, she doesn’t expect anything from him. She can feel it, desperation, the one chance she has to learn about the hospice squandered. If she is ever going to rescue her aunt, she needs to know how the place works. There is a hand around her heart, and the hand is tightening its grip.

“Look,” he says. “Maybe I have a key kicking around.”

Dany freezes. Even her breathing stops.

As she watches, Jasper opens his drawer and rifles through a decade’s worth of crap. Old candy wrappers. Half a dozen paper clips, the wire roughly reshaped as little cats. A spool of twine. As he rummages through the drawer, he tells her all about the jacket. What’s more, he tells her what they keep in those shipping containers at the back of the prison-run hospice.

“Ah,” he finally says. “Here it is.”

He holds a slim hex key in his hand, considering it.

“The yellow jackets have a reinforced band at the waist. They lock,” Jasper says. “It’s the only way to keep the damn things on them. This, it’s just a modified hex key, really.”

Dany has seen what the virus does to the human brain.

She pictures the hypothalamus – shrunken and rutted – like a miniature peach pit. All dried up. That little pea-sized part of the brain doesn’t seem like much. But it regulates the body’s temperature. It regulates hunger and thirst. Late in infection, when that little pea in the brain shrinks up, body temperature goes haywire. After that, the infected shed their clothes where they

stand. Hence the yellow plague jackets, which come down just past the hips.

Hence the locks.

But by then, a person isn't a person. Or so they say. At least, a person isn't a person *legally* speaking.

But if you love them, really love them, they have to be a person still. Deep inside. It just stands to reason. But then, that little pea in the brain also regulates feelings. Like how attached a mother is, say, to her children.

Like the hypothalamus, after infection sets in, love shrinks up like a peach pit.

When Dany pictures the woman in the alley, she sees the silhouettes of two kids in a framed picture, there, in her shopping cart, and her heart feels like it is being squeezed. Her heart is inside of a hand, and the hand becomes a fist. But Dany shuts her thinking down right there.

No more pictures. No more thoughts. She narrows to the razor's edge of the present.

To the key.

"Give it here?" Dany asks and holds out her hand, eyes focused on that little knot of muscle, the Adam's apple, that bobs and dances beneath the skin of Jasper's throat.

Jasper looks at her hand, her trembling hand, and tries to catch her eye. A moment later, he frowns. "I can't take you into the hospice," he says. "It's not going to happen."

Dany shrugs, her eyes dipping down to his shoes. "I just want the key."

Still, he doesn't give it over.

He holds onto that key, shaking his head. Already, she can see him doubting the impulse that had him excavate his drawer.

"Please," she says. "Just let me see it."

"Why? What's with you and the key?"

Dany takes a deep breath.

She wants to tell him all of it. She wants to tell Jasper the truth. About her mom. About her aunt. But she can't. The truth is locked up too deep. So deep, maybe, there are no words. So

she tells him the other part. She tells him about the nightmare. How this morning she woke up ice cold, covered in sweat. How she dreamed that she was inside of one of those yellow jackets. How, when she tried to take it off, her hands didn't work. How she couldn't get the thing off. That's not all of it. That's not even the worst of it. But somehow, it does the trick. Because a moment later, the key is in her hand, and she is holding the slender thing up to the light.

"Have you had a chance," Jasper asks, glancing at the screen, "to look at that book I gave you?"

Dany looks at Jasper's face.

She finds it easier to look at him when his eyes are on the screen, absorbed by the virus. Harry Harlow and his wire-and-cloth mothers. She's not only read the book, she's named her damned lab rats after the man. Harry and Lolo. But she isn't exactly going to admit that to Jasper. If she tells him she's read the trauma book, he'll want to talk about it. And, yeah, she knows where that conversation is headed. . . .

"Yeah, no," she says and bites her thumbnail.

Jasper looks at her, but Dany shifts her eyes to the spool in his drawer.

"Here, cut me some string," she says, nodding at the spool. "I'm going to wear this key around my neck."

Jasper looks at her – and she knows there is no way. He isn't going to let her keep it. Not in a million years. But then, she shifts her gaze back to him. Raises her eyes. Lets him meet her eyes for a moment. Even though it's too much. Even though it feels like being touched, here, like fingers wetting themselves on her eyeballs. Even though it feels like letting him reach inside of her.

"I just want to be able to sleep," she says and shrugs. And when she can't stand it a second longer, she looks down from Jasper's gaze. Takes a shaky breath.

Jasper blinks, closing his eyes for a long moment. His expression pained.

But she knows. Even before he opens his eyes again, she knows that she'll have that key, have it for always.

## | CHAPTER 0 = X + 4

Dany toys with the hex key. The brass cylinder hangs from her neck on a bit of twine. She'll never again be without it. Already, an image is half formed in her mind. Another piece of the plan. She is testing the knot in the twine when Eva trips into the lab, a sandwich in one hand, a hideous orange mug in the other.

"Deej!" she squeaks.

As always, Eva is dressed like a rockabilly science nerd. She wears a lab coat with her initials, EAW, embroidered on the pocket. Eva is grinning madly – her eyes twinkling from the shadows of enormous rolled bangs.

Dany nods at the lunchroom, and Eva grins – but there's at least a dozen people she just has to say hello to on her way through the lab.

Finally, ten minutes later, the two sit down across from each other in the break room.

Dany sniffs the air, takes in the rich plastic smell of Eva's coffee. Even with all the money Eva's family has, they can't get their hands on real coffee more than a couple times a year. One sniff and Dany knows it. The dark liquid in that cup is synth.

"So, you're going in the wet lab today?" Eva asks.

Dany shakes her head. "Nah. Jasper's got some killer virus in there. So, like, you didn't miss anything."

“Ontologically speaking,” Eva asks her, tipping her glasses low on her nose, “bigger picture level, is it even possible for me to miss anything? All your rats ever do is squeak and shit.”

“What do you want?” Dany asks. “Fireworks? An explosion?”

“Oh my god, yes,” she says, her eyes lighting up. “That would be amazing. I may be a scientific agnostic, but exploding rats, that would make me *believe*.”

Eva sounds better to Dany, at least, better than Friday night. “So, you okay?” Dany asks, her voice pitched low.

Eva nods then shrugs – the two expressions cancelling each other out. *It is what it is, then*. “Thanks,” Eva adds, “for letting me crash the other night.”

Dany nods, but she’s looking at the lunchroom floor. In the daylight, Eva was bright and fearless and full of words, but at night, you could tell that things at home got to her. On Friday night, she’d slept over, and the two of them had fallen asleep holding hands, Mac snuggled between them.

Eva pushes half her breakfast sandwich over to Dany. “You need to eat real food,” she says, nudging the sandwich. “Even just once a week, say. My second cousin would only eat Velveeta cheese on Wonder bread – like that’s all he ate, ever. Guess what he got for his nineteenth birthday?”

“A car?”

“Well, yeah, that and a colostomy bag.”

“Seriously?” Dany asks, eyes on the sandwich.

Eva nods. “Eat it. Consider it a present, from me.”

Dany nudges the sandwich back Eva’s way, and takes in her friend’s glasses. A little dot of light – almost imperceptible – blinks from the hinge. There, the little spot where temple meets eyeglass frame. “You are not videotaping this conversation,” she says to her friend.

“It’s my diary,” Eva says.

“I don’t like cameras,” Dany tells her.

Eva touches her ear, and the tiny light goes out.

“You want to see the virus?” Dany asks her. “Jasper put the sample in the wet lab under a digital microscope.”

Eva shrugs and rolls her eyes.

In her mind's eye, Dany pictures the virus Jasper showed her. "It looks like a little planet."

"That's more your gig," Eva says. "I'm not into weird *microscopic* shit. I'm more into, like, weird *macroscopic* shit. You know, life forms . . . of an exceptional nature."

"Yeah, what life form's that?"

But Eva just looks at Dany and sips from her mug, a mysterious little smile on her face.

Dany, only now, gets a really good look at the mug in Eva's hands, the one she's been toying with the whole time. It is hand thrown, the ceramic shell a hideous orange. At first, she thinks it's a monkey, and yes, it is definitely some kind of primate. But as the features slowly resolve, Dany sees that Eva is drinking from the head of a grinning sasquatch.

"Uh, so, what is that?" Dany asks, squinting at the thing. "Your drinking partner?"

"This receptacle," Eva says, taking in the bright orange mug, "is emblematic of my future studies."

Dany eyes the orange monkey.

"And what's that?" Eva asks, nodding at the key.

"Jasper gave it to me," Dany tells her.

Eva must hear something in Dany's voice, because she narrows her eyes and tilts her head. "I didn't think you were . . . that attached to him," she says. "I mean, that attached to anybody." Eva guffaws. "Well, outside of Mac."

Dany stares at her friend for a beat, surprised.

Her hand reaches for the hex key, and she remembers what they said about her in court. A lot of bullshit about survivor's guilt and flattened affect and post-traumatic stress disorder. As if she'd been *post* anything. But then, that was a long time ago. Still, the thought is enough to make her pull at the long sleeves of her shirt self-consciously.

Dany takes a second to find the words. "We're friends?" she asks.

Eva coughs up a laugh and gives Dany the side-eye.

After a pause and only, Dany suspects, because she is staring a hole into Eva's chest, her friend nods, embarrassed. "Don't be a dummy. I know you 'love' me or whatever." Eva puts air quotes around the word. Still, a blush of red butterflies out over Eva's chest and neck, to blossom on her cheeks. In a whisper, she adds, "Vice versa, too, 'kay?"

Dany's heart is beating rabbit-fast. She looks at the floor in the break room.

The floors are unnaturally clean – everywhere in the lab. It is as if, whenever you lift your eyes from the ground, tiny robots scurry out and scour the surface. At her apartment, the floors look nothing like this.

"Yeah, me too," Dany tells the floor.

"No, yeah, I know, DJ. I know."

Dany hears Eva speak, but the words are far away. In her mind's eye, Dany pictures the virus. The one that probably swims in the eyes of the woman who trawls their back alley, her gaze on Dany and Mac.

And suddenly, just like that, the whole world feels unsure.

Topsy-turvy.

Dany's breaths come quicker and her heart stutters out its beat. Because, yes, she sees an image of the virus and then of the woman. There is an image of Miss P and then a dozen angry beige suits – the Ministry of Child Services. Eva's mouth is grinning – but her friend's face grows small and distant, a tiny satellite, a thousand miles away. And then Dany can't see Eva at all, because her head is flooding with pictures.

First, there is an image of the virus – a tiny planet whose surface blooms with mushroom-like buttons. But no sooner does she picture its bumpy surface than it is replaced by an image of Mac. And then Dany sees the hospital and the courtroom and, as the psychiatrist's voice drones on and on, she sees something worse. So much worse. There and then gone. In the flash of emergency lights, she sees children playing a sad and broken game of ring around the rosie. The last image hits her like a body blow, but one of such short duration she can breathe through it, breathe past it.



Dany knows tricks.

She knows how to shut the pictures down. How to turn the inside of her mind as dark as a theatre. How to push her mind down, under conscious thought, where all is dark and dim. No red ropes. No window well. No fire. No words. No Dany, even. A place *beneath* memory. But she hasn't figured out how to stop the pictures. They float up. Snapshots, set down in mind by a painfully precise memory. She doesn't know how to shut off the tiny light bulbs that are her neurons, the *mind* electric. Her brain is alive with flickering pictures. And through her picture-perfect memory the past lives on and on.

Inside the lunchroom, there is a girl. And inside of her head, there are pictures. So, yes, she sees Eva's mouth forming words. The sound is strange, delivered in slow motion. Dany tries to make the pictures stop, but the memories crash into her, a black river of dominoes. The pictures always end the same way – with Mac and her separated.

Dany knows that her breathing is all wrong. This *isn't* how you breathe. Because she isn't breathing, now, she's gasping.

She pulls at the cuffs of her long sleeves – plucks at the worn seams, the hem half undone already. Eva stands, hand outstretched, and the chair, behind her, suspended in a slow topple.

A moment later, her friend is by her side, holding her steady, and Dany, she's looking right at her. Weirdly, she is looking Eva right in the face, but she isn't seeing Eva, not now. Because the pictures are gone and in their place is pain. A throb of pain. An electric pulse of light. Dany folds over, her head hits the table – and her mind explodes. Electric tree roots shoot up into her brain. The pain takes on a colour, a hue. A blue-violet hum. The pain vibrates up, around, to the place where the knives are, just behind her eyes.

*Occipital neuralgia*, the work farm's nurse said. *Have you fallen down again? Hit your head?*

*Stress*, the doctor in the burn ward said. *Have you thought about taking up a hobby? Knitting?* But, with a glance at her bandages, he changed his mind. *Well, not now, perhaps. But catch up on your TV.*

*Just breathe*, her aunt would say.

*I'm sorry for what happened to you, I'm so sorry*, Aunt Norah would croon, holding Dany's head in her lap, smoothing her hair. *Breathe*, she'd say. *Just breathe. Let it all go and breathe.*

But with her aunt gone, all Dany has are numbers. When things get bad, she recites primes or runs through a Lucas sequence. Today, she does Fibonacci sums.

*Zero, one, one.* But inside her skin, the nerves are as sharp as piano strings. *Thirteen, twenty-one, thirty-four.* With each sum, she eases knots and unwinds nerves. *Two hundred and thirty-three, three hundred and seventy-seven.* Each number takes on a hue, shivers with shape and colour. She can almost feel her aunt's hands, almost hear her whisper, *Breathe, breathe.* At *twenty-eight thousand, six hundred and fifty-seven* the pain ebbs and dulls.

"You're okay," Eva is saying, rubbing her back. But Eva's voice drifts towards Dany from another galaxy. Still, Dany follows the thread of Eva's voice back to the lunchroom. She takes one deep breath after another. And then she's here again, a girl, sitting at a table.

Red-faced. A total idiot.

"You okay?" Eva asks.

"Yeah," Dany says. Luckily, it's just the two of them in the break room. "Just, I, I had a rough morning. Wasn't time to eat."

"You scared me," Eva says, nudging the sandwich her way.

And then Eva shakes her head and stares pointedly at the wall. There, by the door, a bullet list has been printed out and taped up.

*REPORT ALL SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS* is written in all caps at the top.

"Don't tell them," Dany begs her friend. "Please. They'll send me home." Dany knows that no one is allowed to come into the lab, not when they are even a little bit sick. But she isn't sick. "I'm just hungry," she says. Really goddamned hungry.

Eva frowns and shakes her head, staring at her. Finally, Dany meets her friend's eyes.

"If you eat half of the sandwich," Eva says, "I won't say a thing."

**ANNE STONE**

Dany flicks a glance from the sandwich to the clock. There is time for a bite. One eye on the clock, she scarfs the sandwich down.



Anne Stone is the author of three previous novels, *Delible* (2007), *Hush* (1999) and *jacks: a gothic gospel* (1998). She is currently at work on a collection of short fiction. She spent her childhood in Toronto, lived in Montreal and now makes her home in Vancouver, where she teaches Creative Writing and Literature at Capilano University.

*“Girl Minus X* is what happens when great writing meets a mesmeric, page-turning plot. The best speculative fiction captures what we dimly imagine but intimately feel; and this book wins in its gripping tale of intense social crises, complicated family members, dismal pressures from school and a young woman awakening to her own uncanny power.

Anne Stone will captivate both teens and adults alike.”

**DAVID CHARIANDY**, author of *Soucouyant* and *Brother*

X

“What if you could let go of your trauma? Now, what if that process was forced on you by a virus that robbed you of all memories?

*Girl Minus X* explores the bonds between humans surviving mid-apocalypse. Nobody writes like Anne Stone. Get prepared for the unthinkable.”

**EMILY POHL-WEARY**, author of  
*Not Your Ordinary Wolf Girl* and *Ghost Sick*

X

## AS THE WORLD AROUND THEM COLLAPSES

under the weight of a slow, creeping virus that erodes memory, fifteen-year-old Dany and her five-year-old sister are on the edge of their own personal apocalypse – fearing separation at the hands of child services. When a dangerous new strain of the virus emerges, Dany careens headlong into crisis, determined to save her sister. Together with her best friend and reluctant history teacher, they must flee the city. Along the way, Dany faces a series of devastating choices: Can she make the dangerous attempt to break her aunt out of the prison-hospice? And just how much is Dany willing to sacrifice to ensure her sister and her friends survive?

*Girl Minus X* is a meditation on the gift that is memory and its hidden costs, pitting a fear of forgetting against a desire to erase the past.



**\$22.00 CDN / \$19.00 US**

[www.wolsakandwynn.ca](http://www.wolsakandwynn.ca)

ISBN 978-1-989496-11-4



9 781989 496114