

Conversation Pieces
Volume 46

A Day in Deep Freeze

by
Lisa Shapter





Published by Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

Copyright © 2015 by Lisa Shapter
All rights reserved. First Edition, April 2015

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the author.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN: 978-1-61976-083-7

Cover illustrations: Tombstone, © Can Stock Photo Inc / vician
Ice and tree blossoms photos by Lisa Shapter

Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:
www.writersmugs.com

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

*To the memory of poet Gil Pettigrew,
for all our conversations about prejudice.*

6 a.m.

I woke up. It was utterly dark. I flailed around in my bunk wondering where the light had gone and bumped the warm skin of a back. I never brought anyone back to my bunk; I couldn't be seen with a lover, no matter who it was. Was this some boyfriend playing a prank on me? Had some shiftmate found my bunk closer to the door than his and fallen asleep here? I felt for the back and pushed at him.

A grunt.

"Where's the light?" I asked.

I looked around wildly. The bunkroom doorway, which had no door to close, should be directly to my left. Behind it the lights of the Factory's main room should always be on. I turned my head to the left and saw utter, total darkness. I couldn't hear any machines: not the half-felt hum of the generators, or the rush of fluid through pipes, or pumps struggling with paste, or the grumbling of pressure regulators as they added water, or the muffled clacks of valves inside the pipes. Not the faintest sound of any power anywhere in the Factory. That would be why the lights were out.

I looked at the figure asleep beside me; no, there was a little light, enough to tell the bedding from the blackness around it. I got out of bed and went to the window: the Factory had no windows. The Factory was three stories underground to prevent contamination of the town, the world, Above.

I opened the curtain and looked at the silent, snow-covered suburban street in the light of the street lamp on the corner. My street: my and my neighbors' cars were all parked in their driveways. The plow had been through, leaving icy heaps of snow at the street's margins. It was overcast and windless, with no sign of dawn or life. I looked back over my shoulder. A double bed, not a single bunk, and the sleeping figure was my wife.

I was Above; I'd been Above for eight years, a year longer than most of my fellow workers from the Factory, all men. I'd been part of an advance party of six that escaped one year earlier than the rest; we'd spent all of that year trying to free the rest through complaints, allegations, attempts at legal action, all futilely. We could take nothing with us; the company would have put us in jail if we had, and we had no cameras. We could not send an inspector or advocate in because of the quarantine. The company would permit only its own employees to enter, for safety reasons. It was our disgruntled and undocumented word against a trusted corporation whose chemical and pharmaceutical innovations had helped save the world from fascism. All the lawyers we spoke to asked for documentation and evidence; the most memorable ended our short consultation by shaking his head and saying we were asking the corporation to verify its own misdeeds.

After the first few months Under, all communications with the outside stopped. The one telephone was behind a locked door that no Shiftmanager's pass key opened. The town post office would not pick up the Factory's bin of letters since the smudges and damp stains seemed like contamination. "Dangerous goods that might be a risk to the health or safety of post office workers cannot be sent through the US Mail," our town postmaster said in the last piece of mail we received on top of a bin of unsent letters. There was no clean place Under; the drug was talcum-fine

and turned any puddle or damp rag into slimy ochre mud. So our letters stopped going out long before we could have reported any trouble to any kind of agency or panel or board, or even our own parents or friends in town or in the towns around it.

I leaned on the cool wooden windowsill and looked out at what there was of the morning. Pressurized water and steam, high rail-less catwalks, open vats, sharp edges, exposed wires, and darkness—none of those was the real danger of the place. The real danger was inside each of us, even if the doctor that our old bosses had hired has insisted we could not “contaminate” anyone. The company’s claims about “safety” astonished him: we were not radioactive; the drug we worked with was a chemical, not a living thing like a virus or bacteria. Our helper speculated that either the company knew something about its new psychiatric drug that it would not tell us or its concerns about safety were an exaggerated anxiety for its patents. Our factory had been a small pilot plant, an experiment.

Some of us grumbled that we had been the experiment. It was only grumbling. The drug came out of the company’s work on drugs in warfare. It wasn’t a battlefield chemical like mustard gas, or it should not be since that kind of weapon was banned in 1925. The drug came out of something smaller-scale and more specific. We hit a dead end there: we could find no information about who the company was talking to at P.O. Box 1142 in Fort Hunt, Virginia.

I felt the cold coming through the panes of the window glass. With a slight sound, the furnace came on, and the house filled with a soft warmth. The Factory had no climate control; it was always a level 55 degrees Fahrenheit, except under the sweltering evaporation lamps. I don’t remember an entire day I felt warm there, but I had friends, boyfriends, blankets, work, idle moments to sun under the

lamps... There were ways to warm up, and feeling chilled had been the least of my worries.

I got back into bed with my wife. A new mattress that we'd just turned, soft rich sheets, more than enough blankets (and more in the linen closet if I wanted them), a large plump pillow—and no danger, never any more danger, it was all over. I went back to sleep.

7:30 a.m.

I woke up to the electronic blat of the alarm, heart pounding, thinking for a moment that it was the Factory's shift bell and that I was late for work.

"Did I wake you up?" I asked.

"Hm," my wife Emily said around a thermometer, shaking her head. She was sitting up against the headboard watching the bedside clock and spent the next few moments fussing with the soft curlers under her pink nightcap and tucking dark loose ends of hair into place. I never understood how curlers did not pull her hair: it was important to her that she looked "just so" by breakfast; I would not notice one way or the other. After a moment she put the calendar on the bedside table and read the thermometer under the lamp. "Today's not good," she said.

"When will be?" I said, in my best approximation of cheer. I hated the feeling that I had to perform.

"In a few days," Emily said, looking tired and not at all in the frame of mind to be asked for something earlier and more spontaneous. I had no idea why she did not turn over and go back to sleep like any sensible person. I learned how to cook in the Factory, I did not need my wife to wake up early and make breakfast, with her and the house both looking ready for magazine photographers. Emily had given a startled laugh the one time I had suggested she sleep in while I do my own morning cooking and dishes. I forgot: in this world men cannot cook or do dishes.

“You’re being a real trooper with this,” I said, touching her shoulder.

“I wish the doctor could tell us what’s wrong. . . .”

I knew what was wrong. In seven years Above, almost none of us from the Factory had fathered children. The drug we worked with got into everything, permeated our bodies. If it could affect our brains, then it could go anywhere and interfere with anything. The doctor who’d agreed to help us could only shrug—the company claimed the drug and all its components were harmless, nearly without side-effects, but I had the sense that the doctor could lose his license for helping us and trying to study it without the blessing of the company that made it. He could only suggest we try to have children under more careful conditions, checking for this and that negative factor as we went. This year it was my wife: exams and blood tests and thermometers and calendars.

We both want children. I haven’t told her about the Factory, or the drug. The doctor has said I should be honest, spare her the heartbreak of thinking we can conceive when very likely we cannot. My old Factory bosses, the men we elected from our numbers, who’ve led our investigation and fight against the company that did all of this to us, all the Shiftmanagers have said to me at one time or another that I should be honest with her.

The company has never been interested in finding us, not even those of us who escaped a year early, but the drug has helped so many people now that no one wants to hear what we went through or how it might be dangerous. We thought well of them, too, when we saw and heard their ads, growing up during the war; it was why we were glad to take jobs at their pilot plant, submit to intrusive physicals and questionnaires, and sign form after form. Now that we were Up, we saw that their ad men were still hard at work. The Factory’s company had put its wartime good name

behind a series of endorsements and advertisements for its new product: “a new drug of more use and help than any of the previous drugs,” the “promise of turning psychiatry into a truly effective *medical* science.” After all that, people who might have listened to a story of a company’s mistake or a subcontractor’s negligence now asked us what we had against progress. The current plants that make the drug have never had any industrial accidents or mishaps, or none that have made the news. But those plants had been completed, were far larger, and built on a different plan: according to news stories, the drug in them is carefully sealed away from those workers they never have to brush it off their morning toast or wipe it off a ladder before climbing it. The company’s training literature for us said it was safe, so it took us nearly a year to connect the slick ubiquitous dust to our problems.

But our troubles have not stopped now that we are away from the drug. People in this city have heard of us: our first year Above we had one murder (with court case). Now we try to stay out of trouble and out of the newspapers. We do our best to blend in and keep our troubles to ourselves.

My wife squeezed me. “Emran, it’s not your fault. You’re a normal, healthy man; last year proved that. I don’t doubt you.” The doctor had agreed not to tell my wife about the drug or anything else that went with it. Emily ran her hand over my back, and her neatly painted nails made a sound against my nightshirt. “Oh, Emran, he’s a good doctor. If there’s any way we can have a baby, he’ll find it.”

“I know he will, Emily.” I turned to her, made myself smile, then kissed her, careful to keep it a peck. “You just wait,” I said, winking and nodding at the calendar.

I got up and took a shower. My hair was getting a little long; I liked being able to keep it cut. The Factory’s cook had kept a careful eye on all the scissors (and knives and everything else similarly sharp or pointy), and getting a haircut

meant asking him for a pair, then either finding somebody trustworthy to cut it or hacking it off, yourself, blind. I got my date book out of my jacket pocket and made a note to get a haircut. Emily came in with my ironed shirt and a matching tie. It was Monday: I shined my shoes, then finished getting dressed.

My wife met me in the kitchen, beautifully dressed in yellow and green with her hair done. Breakfast was on the table. My grandparents had a farm outside of town; for them a breakfast of eggs and Belgian waffles and sausage and a slice of berry or apple pie and a bowl of cereal with cream made sense. I thought about the doctor's advice and ate the soft-boiled eggs with a slice of toast and a glass of tomato juice, adding a waffle to spare Emily's feelings. My wife thought I expected big breakfasts and jumped to the conclusion that I was disappointed with her when I refused them. It's never occurred to her to blame me or ask questions. I was grateful for that. Every other ex-worker from the Factory has lost girlfriends, sometimes marriages, for not telling the truth. I had been lucky, but I must always be careful. I finished the waffle while Emily asked me what I wanted for dinner, and we talked about her plans for the day: vacuuming the living room, watering the plants (and were the violets in that pot gone for the world?), laundry, and what would I like to wear the rest of the week (did I have anything important coming up?), meals for the rest of the week, and she hoped to finish another strip on the afghan. Her friends would come pick her up for the few hours she put in at the clothing store, in town (to have a bit of extra money for the baby; normally she didn't need to work with the money I made), and remember that her church-friends were coming by to pick her up for bowling, that evening.

I finished the last of my toast and wished her luck. (I bit my tongue on asking her to say hi to Terry, an old coworker

from the Factory who had taken up bowling in an effort to look more normal: to socialize with people other than our old coworkers and to seem interested in women. In truth, the man he had at home was someone who would never, ever leave him, a reciprocal feeling; the casual girlfriends they had were only for appearances.) My wife wished me the best for my day, I put on my coat and hat, and shoveled out the end of the driveway. The sun had come up; it was going to be a cold, overcast day. At least it was still and windless. I didn't mind the work; it helped keep me warm.

8:30 a.m.

I drove to work. The roads were as good as they could be with the weather we'd been having: a thin dry pack of sand and salt. Only warmer weather would melt the roads dry and clear—and salt-stained. It was a short drive to downtown Riverport, New Hampshire, from my suburban neighborhood. I pulled into my parking space, tried to smell the sea on the cold wind, then went inside, to a blast of dry heat and the smell of weak coffee. The secretaries greeted me, and I smiled back and went into my office to hang up my coat and hat. At least the weather wasn't bad enough for boots.

I went out to get the feel of the outer office—reading moods had meant everything in the Factory, the difference between safety and danger. With my first cup of coffee, I went up and down the office, watching and chatting. There was no danger here, just the file clerk, my boss, the secretaries, the delivery man, and a fellow from manufacturing. This building was just offices and files, typewriters and company exhibits, and a meeting room—safe, well-lit, painted, and carpeted. I had a nice office with a window, the door handsomely lettered with “Emran A. Greene, Accountant.” I was still proud of that, proud that I'd paid back my Factory coworkers for the money they'd lent me from their since-Under jobs to go to school, proud I'd gone to school and done so well during the worst years of my life, proud of the jobs I'd gotten and kept until I

was the accountant for this company, proud of the job I was doing here, of the raise I'd gotten, of the Christmas bonus I could expect, of the life it had allowed me to put together: the house, the car, the wife.

In all my days Under, I never thought I'd have any of it. I thought I'd be some man's, forever. The drug we worked with was full of nasty tricks. Above, it cured a broad spectrum of psychiatric conditions (putting a legion of resentful Analysts out of work). That was really a blessing, the drug's invention: I bet there's not a soul in this office who hasn't been helped by, or known someone who has been helped by, the drug. It helped with any kind of emotional condition: the death of a pet, anxiety about a surgery, a morbid fear of rodents.

Unfortunately, those of us who worked with it in the first pilot plant, all men, were exposed to something a bit different: it made us feel basal things, at random, toward anyone...and if two of us felt the same thing at the same time for long enough, then it connected those two men forever.

Sex worked. So did fear—and anger. The resulting bond between the two men looked like love. The men acted like it, hating to be separated; but I remember it, and it wasn't quite love. It wasn't the way I feel about my wife.

I took a gulp of coffee. The Factory's cook had made better coffee. He was murdered trying to fight off a rape.

I pushed the past out of my mind and started on the project my boss had asked me to finish by Wednesday. I had never thought I was especially smart in high school, or that I'd ever make a living from something that felt like a pleasant challenge. I might as well have had a job doing crossword puzzles. I went to work, my office door left open. I went in and out to ask for files, listened to the hum of polite voices, the footsteps on carpet, and the cheerful clatter and ding of typewriters. I began to make notes for the report I'd have one of the secretaries type up, strings

of numbers and abbreviations that probably only I could read, with underlines, sentence fragments, ideas for how to phrase the report so it wouldn't anesthetize anyone who read it. I smiled at the clerk or secretary who brought in the files I requested or came to put them back. And about an hour later, I looked up and decided to stretch my legs.

10 a.m.

I looked out the window behind my desk, out onto Main street. The weather hadn't changed. It looked cold out there: I was glad to be in here and warm. I wondered how long it would take for me to get used to seasons after the Factory's constant level of light and temperature. I was glad, once again, for windows and freedom, and that put a smile on my face.

I walked up and down the office: the mood was still good. I nodded to the people who could spare a moment from their work or current errand. I noticed that one of the secretaries looked irritated, and one of the supervisors from manufacturing looked ready to tear someone a new orifice, but no danger to me or to anyone around me—and I remembered that I had an office to return to with a door that shut. (Almost no doorway in the Factory had a door hung on it, the whole place was half-finished. It had been built to be mechanized, not staffed by men. We never knew exactly why they put the 125 of us in that miserable place to begin with.) The morning had been safe so far and looked like it would continue to be. I circled around to the coffee station and thought about my options in peace.

I tried the tea: it wasn't any better than the coffee. It didn't have that pleasant drawing feeling, almost a tartness, that good tea has, just a heavy, dull taste on the back of my tongue. I'd almost recovered my full sense of taste and smell from having worked with the drug for two years;

even away from it, at first all I could smell or taste was it. I went back to my office and smiled (in a friendly way) at the secretaries, gave a bit of chocolate to the one who looked put out, said something kind to the file clerk (who was doing a very dull job with as much cheer as anyone could expect), told my boss of my morning's progress, and went back into my office with the tea, shutting the door.

I looked out the window again, never tired of it. The slightest cold breeze moved the dark twigs of the trees against the lines of the sidewalk. The brickwork around the trees was covered with dirty frozen snow and the concrete sidewalk was still a hazard of bare patches and ice, all scattered with sand. You could half-think you were walking in the beach in this weather, it was the same ochre sand as the local seashore. Not good for my shoes, not when mixed with rock salt.

With the overcast I was just able to see my reflection: I'd filled out and finished my growth in my eight years. Above, eating better and not always worrying about the safety of my skin. I was starting to gain a bit of weight, had a husbandly, safe look about me that I thought suited my life very well. I didn't want to put on any more weight, though; I had a wife to please and my own self-respect to keep up. Just because I was safe shouldn't mean that I went all to seed.

I'd never understood my place in the Factory very well. I'd spent time there looking in the rare mirror trying to understand how I'd gotten into that fix. Some of us were fair game for everyone, some of us completely safe. You'd think the younger, the frailer, the slighter would make up all the boys, the victims, but build and looks—even personality—didn't explain it all. It was a strange alchemy of how we'd gotten along before the Factory, in boy scouts, high school, at summer jobs, and in regional sports teams, and how we settled in during the first months at the Factory.

All those factors determined who was a man, who was safe (and able to take the pickings of the boys).

The drug interfered with everything: our justice system, innocent friendships, our abilities to control our impulses, our affections and crushes. In our first days Above, the bond had blackmailed an Analyst into helping us (the fact that she was still working as an Analyst meant she was no friend of the company or its drug). She has asked us whether it was like prison, or war...but what she described to us of those circumstances didn't quite ring true. With the bond we could be paired up with anybody, permanently, by accident. With the drug the slightest boy could fly into such a rage that he could beat up and run off five of the burliest men Under; the strongest man could crumple into a heap of tears (or pitiable terror) at any moment, with no warning. Under was a very strange place, and we tried to make it safer by pretending there were two different kinds of people there, but we were all affected equally by the drug in just the same ways.

The boys took me for a boy: I didn't fight the drug or pretend it didn't exist, I was happy to have boyfriends (I was in my late teens, everyone there was between 16 and 23), and I was friendly to everyone. They caught on fairly quickly, though, that the men had also taken me for their own, and I was the only soul Under whom each side regarded as theirs. So long as they didn't catch me with one of my boyfriends, the men could dismiss the rest of my behavior as friendliness or teasing—I was asked to go on patrols of men looking for boys who had succumbed to the drug (no one would say men fell prey to the drug: anyone with a tendency to do so, for any reason, was forever after labeled a boy). I was also asked to participate in rapes, in public, with every eye watching the sincerity of my performance.

During those two years Under I got away with pretending as often as I could, I got away with saying I was bored

or satisfied as often as I could (without harming my red-blooded reputation). I did my best to warn all the boys; but there was no way to undo the whole system, not while enough men insisted the drug was not a factor and that they could never feel a thing for the former classmates they... When I was in an especially bad mood I tried to calculate which side got more: the boys who wanted a bit of fun with whomever caught their eye or the men who said they didn't want it but went looking, anyway.

With the drug, you see, there was no pretending: sex was sex, fear was fear, anger was anger, sadness was tears. It was flatly impossible to do someone you had no feelings for, a fact the boys celebrated among themselves and the men denied. Handling the drug made all of us too emotional, prone to outbursts—we still were and *always* have to watch ourselves, especially around normal people—but the boys hung on their boyfriends and said, “At least we're honest.”

The men thought that was a taunt.

I escaped being raped, but that was no comfort when I had to look in the eye a friend I'd been forced to hurt the night before. I did the best good I could as a spy and a double-agent, but I couldn't take the whole system apart.

I finished my tea and sat down at my desk, getting out the papers for my next project and turning on my desk lamp.

The emergence of the bond had thrown everyone into a panic. It happened after nearly two years Under, obvious for everyone to see, and it took two men. They acted like lovebirds: one of them got his arm broken within the month. After years of casual dalliances the boys were charmed by the prospect of real love (or a man who could never bear to be more than an arm's length away); the men could not believe their eyes. Our bosses, the Shiftmanagers, moved the love-struck pair into hiding somewhere in the Factory and snuck food to them. Although we'd all tried (and given up) on escaping long ago, one of the lovebirds

crossed the length of the Factory every night to creep up a ladder and try the combination lock on the delivery grate...no one knew for how long. Entire nights of worming his hand through the bars to dial “015, 016, 017” until he found the right one.

I wanted to pick up the phone and tell my wife to say hello to Terry. I owed him so much, I could never say thank you often enough for everything he'd done for me. But we never tell outsiders the complete truth about ourselves, not unless we've bonded them and all 118 of us (and our three outsiders) must agree to take any additional outsider in as one of our own. Right now the only other people Above who know everything about the Factory and the drug are Shiftmanager Sam's wife, one Analyst who still thinks the man she's with tricked her quite cruelly, and the doctor who needs to know everything about us if he is going to help.

They've all asked me to be honest with my wife—all the Shiftmanagers from the Factory, plus several of my old friends (and boyfriends). I cannot bond her, trying to get her pregnant is a terribly dangerous game (a thing she has no idea about) that rests on my trying to cultivate a wildly off sense of timing. If we enjoyed that—or any strong emotion—together, we would be bonded, and she would remember everything I remember, she will feel everything I've felt, and oh we will feel so much more in love than we do now. But the price is too terrible: I've been bonded.

I won't think about him. I have work to do. Any man who's bonded can go on about him (or rarely, her) for hours. I can't afford to think about him. I made myself find interest in my work until lunchtime.