

**THE
SISTER
HOOD**

BEN HASTINGS

PROLOGUE

4th April 2024,

As I sit here writing I know they can kill me before I finish my next sentence.

But they haven't.

The threat is real; the fear never goes away.

But I've learnt to be good.

What else has this old man learnt?

I never question the motives and wisdom of Big Brother. I have come to understand that to achieve stability and order and to protect the Party society must embrace conformism and accept that rationing, subjugation, suppression and surveillance are for our benefit.

I am thankful for the independent States of Eurasia, Eastasia and our own Oceania. We must embrace war with a zest akin to life itself. It provides an environment ripe for enforcing discipline, suppressing society, preventing tedium and redirects resentment and aggression into positive channels. Let us acknowledge that death and destruction serve a greater purpose. War prevents overpopulation whilst creating perpetual demand for manufacturing and consumption.

I am frustrated by the stalled growth of the language of Newspeak as the transmission from parent to child fails.

I am most thankful for my wonderful wife Mary, our son Brien, his wife Jane, and our precious little granddaughter Sonya.

I have also learnt that life is making the best of what you've got.

The Party is right.

Two plus two is five.

I have been cured.

Winston Smith

PART I

2039 - 2049



The dark, still silence of early morning was pierced by the harsh tone of a man's voice that goaded Sonya awake. If she were not out of bed within the next 30 seconds, the face on the Telescreen would start yelling at her. Sonya stretched out into the cold, blueish glow of his gaze and flicked the lamp switch to turn on another day. Her squinting eyes gradually adjusted to the light as she stumbled her way to the bathroom for a shower. The water was lukewarm as usual. She was moving too slowly and there was no time for breakfast, just a gulped, weak coffee and a dry biscuit on the run. As she ventured out on her one-kilometre walk to work, it was another bleak, foggy morning and the air tasted dirty. It always felt like it was about to rain – maybe it was the polluted haze that darkened the sky, like pregnant storm clouds about to burst. A pair of pale grey overalls hung loosely on her slender frame and she had to pull the collar in tight to keep out the chilly breeze. In the filtered dawning light, her breath appeared in gusts of mist as she hurried along the rubble-strewn path.

Sonya was a member of the Outer Party and had graduated two years ago, securing her first job in the Assessing Department of the Ministry of Health. Like all government buildings, her place of employment was large and imposing, and although undoubtedly constructed long ago, its exterior displayed obvious strength. It was a multi-storey structure made of light-coloured stone that had darkened over time, being stained by the grimy air. Its few dusty windows of

framed mirror-glass kept out prying eyes.

Daybreak arrived as Sonya stepped inside the cavernous reception area. She sidled past the snaking queues that were already formed in front of a long counter where Ministry staff registered each visitor. The patients were then told to sit in the waiting area until a staff member came to escort them to the Assessing Department. Unnecessary eye contact was avoided and other than the whispering echoes of conversations between staff and the forlorn unwell, the place was soundless.

Sitting at her workstation, Sonya had an unhindered view of the waiting area. During the day, she often glanced across the floor to see how busy the Ministry was, although it was always full. Checking was merely a habit to see if there was anyone in the queue she recognised. The constantly bloated corral of patients was a comfort to her. It meant her twelve hours at work would seem to pass quickly. There was nothing she dreaded more than the fear of being idle.

A sober-looking attendant brought forward her first patient before silently receding. Sonya left the file she was studying and stood to greet him with a confident, outstretched hand and friendly smile.

‘Hello, Comrade Jacobson, please take a seat,’ Sonya said. ‘It looks like we might get some rain.’

‘Thanks. You could be right about the rain,’ he replied.

Jacobson was a middle-aged man who, prior to his illness, had worked in another Outer Party Ministry, the Ministry of Truth. Although Sonya was content with her position, it didn’t stop her wondering what it was like to be employed by one of the other Ministries, especially this most secretive one. He wasn’t supposed to talk about it, but he found Sonya so unusually approachable, he couldn’t stop himself when she questioned him during their previous appointment. His working life had been filled with writing history and rewriting history. As Jacobson described his job, Sonya gradually came to realise that most of what she had ever read had been reworked many times over by the Ministry of Truth. The news bulletins, economic accounts and war reports were constantly being updated

and yes, changed, but it was best to unthink it. Sonya loved reading and books were scarce, although she had managed to collect several old classics on a bookshelf at home.

‘Now tell me how you’re feeling this morning?’ Sonya asked.

‘Double plus ungood. Since my last visit, my dizziness has grown worse. I’ve had night sweats and regular bouts of severe abdominal pain,’ he said, looking more uncomfortable. She peered into his foggy grey eyes as he spoke. He was agonisingly thin and looked to be aging prematurely. His skin was dry and colourless, and his vacant stare only emphasised his poor health.

‘Are the pains becoming more frequent?’

Jacobson gasped as he nodded to confirm and groaned as he slumped further into his chair.

She tapped on her computer tablet as she quickly read the screen before glancing over at the open file amongst the piles on her desk. ‘I have your test results here, Comrade Jacobson,’ she said, now studying his grim face. ‘Your blood work and biopsies indicate that your condition is terminal. I didn’t expect your decline to be so speedful,’ she added. ‘What we need to do is make arrangements to transfer you to Area 15.’

‘Oh, thank you, Comrade,’ Jacobson said. His breathing was laboured and he struggled to blow his nose into a crinkly brown handkerchief. ‘I am sure that will be the best for me.’

Sonya entered the necessary notations into the computer tablet, completed some documents and handed Jacobson a light-scribe. He feebly scrawled his signature across the bottom of the screen.

‘Here, take this Deliciyum. It will ease your pains and relax you,’ she said, putting a spoonful of the yellow powder into a small cup of water and handing it to him. Dispensing the drug was an important function of the Ministry of Health. He took hold of it slowly and tipped the sour drink down his throat.

‘If you would like to follow me, Comrade Jacobson, I’ll show you the way to the Transportation Department.’

‘You mean I’m going right now? Don’t I have to pack some belongings?’

‘Oh, no. There is no need to worry about any of your personal possessions. We will take care of everything and have them waiting for you when you arrive,’ Sonya reassured him as she took up his file and headed towards the door.

Although Jacobson was extremely surprised by how suddenly the arrangements were made for him, he accepted what he was being told. There was nothing else he could do or wanted to do for that matter. He shakily arose from his chair and as he faltered, Sonya swiftly stepped over to support his arm. Apart from the tapping of their footsteps on the hard, grey-tiled floor, it was ghostly quiet as they walked down the brightly lit corridor towards two large, heavy doors. Through them, they passed into a large sterile room that made you feel cleansed upon entering, and where the intense dazzling white glare made your eyes instinctively squint. It was crowded with men, women and children sitting in rows of stiff chairs facing a large, shiny counter that had two serious men perched behind it, their eyes darting about on the screens in front of them. The hush was only broken by the feverish clicking on their touch screens and the occasional whimper of a small girl. There were several people already being attended to at the counter. Sonya and Jacobson waited for their turn.

The waiting area in the Transportation Department was an impersonal space. It was not only obviously full of pain, which Sonya could see on the crowd of frowning faces, but also of anticipation. *Thank goodness for Area 15. We are so lucky to have it,* she thought. She didn’t know much about the mysterious location. Apart from being commonly described as a ‘paradise’, it promised recuperation, rehabilitation, or at least palliative care for the ill, the damaged, the dying and the criminally insane. One thing was certain, though: no one ever returned from Area 15.

‘Good morning, Comrades. It looks like we might get some rain,’ chirped the bureaucratic assistant behind the counter. He looked

Jacobson up and down without smiling as they approached.

‘You could be right about the rain,’ Sonya offered in reply. Now turning to Jacobson, she said, ‘This is Comrade Mack. He will look after you from here and attend to all of your further arrangements.’ She handed the documents to Mack. He gave them a cursory glance. As she watched him, she was impressed by how well he feigned interest. She looked at Jacobson and nodded to him with a weak smile.

‘Okay, Comrade Jacobson, please take a seat and wait until you are called,’ Sonya heard Mack say as she turned to leave.

She had only known Jacobson for a short time but already felt empathy towards him. Pity for his pain, but also optimism for his recuperation at Area 15. Sonya cared and always tried to find the positives in any situation no matter how small they seemed. An extremely rare personality trait in these times that had to be kept hidden away and this only added to her solitude. She wondered how many others there were just like her, guarding their secrets.

Sonya exited the Transportation Department and as she walked briskly back to the compact yet functional cubicle that contained her desk and examination table, she observed her busy Ministry of Health comrades diligently attending to the sick and waning. However, they nor she could provide any therapeutic treatment, substantial medical assistance or even convalescence. Nothing but basic injury care, pain relief and referral to Area 15. The progress of medicine had been abandoned long ago because it was counterproductive to waste resources on prolonging life when the world suffered from overpopulation.

Her next patient was a man whom she didn’t recognise. He had a badly ulcerated ankle that needed to be cleansed of the foul-smelling, thick greenish mucus that oozed from the wound. She looked at him and tapped the examination table, indicating he should lie there.

Sonya gleaned his file and noted he was a garbage collector from East Anglia.

‘Where do you live?’ she asked as a conversation starter.

'In East Anglia, about two kilometres away, in what was my parent's house,' he answered.

'Was?'

'Yes, up until last year. My father was sent to Area 15 when he got too ill to stay at home. I hope to see him again one day, but you know what they say. No one ever returns from Area 15.'

'That they do,' she agreed as she worked on the ankle.

'After Father left, my mother's health started to decline and she died only a month later whilst sitting at the dinner table one night. So speedful. We were eating our meal when she suddenly fell forward, her face landing directly in the bowl, splashing her soup everywhere,' he said.

'That must have been a terrible shock!' Sonya imagined the poor woman coated in the brownish watery sustenance.

'Yeah,' he said, with a slow nod. 'The next day I struggled to carry her all the way here. She was placed on a gurney and I had to wait until someone came and wheeled her away. When they told me I could leave, I did, and I've lived alone ever since.'

'East Anglia is one of the nicer areas,' she said.

Sonya finished with the ankle, bandaged it with a clean dressing, and he was gone in under an hour.

Whilst completing his file as she sat in the firm but comfortable plain white chair behind her desk, the reception doors burst open and caught her attention. A man carrying a limp girl of about five years old came ambling through, requesting urgent help. Sonya stood up and beckoned him towards her with a wave. The tall man with a furrowed brow and watery blue eyes headed straight for her, bypassing the queues, and laid the unconscious child on the table in front of her. She checked the small girl's pulse and breathing and knew from the look of her badly broken left leg that she had been in some sort of horrible accident. Of more concern was the patch of deep reddish purple expanding across her bulging lower abdomen. It meant internal injuries far beyond Ministry capabilities.

‘What do you think, Comrade?’ the man pleaded.

‘Double plus ungood. I can only recommend she be sent to Area 15,’ she said, unemotionally.

‘But she’s so young and I’ll never see her again,’ said the man in disbelief.

‘Please don’t worry, they’ll take good care of her,’ she said.

I know we have Area 15, but I wish I could do more, she thought without changing her expression – it would be dangerous to do otherwise. But she only knew basic wound care. Of course, in an environment of unsanitary living conditions that encouraged bacteria and where infections flourished like mushrooms in manure, this treatment was helpful. However, she longed to do more. She could splint and bandage a broken limb but even this simple therapy was prone to failure and Deliciyum was of no use to this poor girl. Her mind was racing. *Why can’t I cure diseases and treat serious injuries?*

Sonya sighed and sat back at her overloaded desk, tucking some loose strands of long blonde hair back behind her ear. She opened another file in preparation for receiving her next patient. It was only 7.42 a.m.

A dull headache was creeping up on her and turning her thoughts to a dose of Deliciyum when the Department Supervisor suddenly poked his head into her station.

‘Could you please come to my office, Comrade?’ he asked, then walked away, not waiting for an answer. Sonya looked up from her work, a little startled by the request. In all her years working at the Ministry she had only ever experienced cold greetings from him and could count on one hand the number of times they had spoken. Her heart skipped a few beats before starting to thud heavily as she immediately got up and followed him.

Her Supervisor was a tall man with lean features, a workaholic who expected nothing less of those around him. His dark narrow-set eyes seemed too close together and emphasised his hollow cheeks and sharp jawline. As Sonya observed the balding spot on the back

of his head, it crossed her mind that she had never seen him smile, a stark reminder of the bitter disenchantment that choked society. He sat down at his desk and whilst considering the messy pile of papers scattered in front of him, he began speaking.

‘Comrade Smith, your diligence has been noted by the Inner Party and they have decided to promote you to Section Manager effective immediately. A departmental announcement will be issued within the hour. Could you please be ready to vacate your desk and move into management station 44C.’ He looked up, handed her a single sheet of pale pink paper, and said, ‘Congratulations,’ before rubbing the corners of his closed eyes with his right thumb and forefinger. By the time he resumed typing on his illuminated screen, she was gone.

Sonya packed up her meagre collection of personal effects whilst waiting for the announcement. In a small brown box, she carefully placed a pale blue ceramic cup with a slightly chipped handle, a collection of some prized pencils, a favourite light-scribe, a small paperweight made of clear glass encasing a fragment of ancient pink coral, and a picture frame housing a photo of her pet bird: a petite grey-and-white skittish finch with a vibrant red beak whom she had named Hope.

Then there it was, a simple message scrolled across the screen on her desk and on every other one in the Ministry:

...Comrade 60792 Smith S. is relocating within the Ministry due to promotion ...

At the age of nineteen Sonya had excelled amongst her peers in the Ministry; even so, her promotion was sudden and unexpected. There was no need for her to do anything with the files she was currently working on. She rose from her chair and quietly left the station she had occupied for just over two years. Striding to her new location, Sonya passed the cubicles of her busy co-workers. She knew only a few of their names, and one was Comrade 59849 Robinson B. For a fleeting moment, her radiant blue eyes found his and she returned Billy’s faint smile with her own as she walked by. Not long after she

had vacated, a small, thin woman with mousey-brown hair would arrive to occupy her old cubicle.

Following the bright white corridor which served windowless management stations on both sides, Sonya checked their numbers until she came to the one designated 44C. It was less cramped than her previous cubicle, but not as big as an office. She created a space on the crowded desktop to place her box and found a job description memo. It said she was now in charge of overseeing the workload of everyone in her section of the Assessing Department and went on to list her tasks and responsibilities.

Sonya stared at the words and they began to swirl around the page as her mind grappled with the concept that she would no longer be dealing directly with patients. This was the part of her previous work she enjoyed the most, conversing with people and absorbing their stories, their lives. She would dearly miss the daily interactions with her patients like the man with the ulcerated ankle with whom she had spoken for nearly an hour. It felt as if she had been redeployed just as she had begun to develop and extract deeper sentiments and emotions from her role. However, nothing could dampen the gratification she received from being promoted. She didn't like to admit it, but she was proud of her ambition. Sonya smiled to herself briefly. It was the first time she had felt this delighted in a long while. Moments later, she was reviewing the Department's latest processing statistics.