

I Know a Fun Game Called 19th Century Medicine

It's 1848, and a doctor in bloodstained overalls has just told you that you have fever and ague. Or maybe you're just hysterical. It doesn't really matter in the end, the treatment is the same: he'll hold a wedge-shaped knife over your veins and tap the blade with a hammer until the skin splits. You'll bleed into a bucket. There's no leeches here—leeches are for the rich. You're not rich enough for leeches. It's cool though. When you're carried to the window for one last look at the outside world, you watch children toss ribbon-covered hoops to each other, and listen to the thin notes of a pennywhistle in the distance. You cough up blood onto a handkerchief. This isn't a symptom of fever or hysteria, so you probably just bit your tongue. Your last words are, "when was the last time you washed that knife?" before you slip into darkness. It's romantic.

You live in the Oregon Territory now, or I guess you just died in the Oregon Territory. You came here with your husband, a fur trader at a fort out here. Before your anemic and weakened body succumbed to eternal slumber, you helped bake hardtack for sailors and sometimes tended to the garden. You died at twenty-two, which makes your life tragic enough to be nearly poetic. You're laid to rest with a full face of powder (it has lead in it, but you're too dead to care). Rest in peace. END GAME.

Or was that all there was to your life? Were you born in 1826 to a French mother and Scottish father who worked as a clerk, or were you hiding a time machine under that big rock over there? Don't think I didn't notice. You're not as sneaky as you think you are. Go on. Scrawl a message on the wall so a time traveling friend comes to save you. You just can't stay dead, can you? Go to Page 2.

The skies are blue, the breeze is gentle, the apples in this orchard are ripe and fragrant, Thomas is skipping work again to drunkenly play the fiddle, and you're feeling a little down. The last few weeks you've spent mostly in bed, embroidering lethargically while you're propped upright on pillows like a dying king. Occasionally you dab at some ladylike tears with a handkerchief, but today you're walking back from the doctor's quarters and taking a detour through this orchard.

The doctor told you you have too much black bile in your spleen. It's one of the four humors—black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm—and black bile is specifically melancholic. There's three main ways to restore the balance of the humors: cupping, bleeding, and purging. The doctor offers purging, this time. The Everlasting Pill.

The pill's a small metal nugget made out of metallic antimony. When swallowed, the pill leaves behind trace amounts of antimony as it traverses your digestive system. This antimony causes...purging, and when the pill leaves your body through whatever channel the antimony chooses for you, the doctor gets to play the world's worst game of Go Fish. In the early to mid 19th century, if something looks clean, it is. The pill gets fished out of the chamber pot, rinsed, dried, and placed on the shelf for the next patient. Sometimes it's a family heirloom. Sometimes you're swallowing something that was inside great-grandma Martha's large intestine.

If you take the Everlasting Pill, go to Page 9.

If you refuse, go to Page 3.

Why not? Don't you want to feel better? You're not making sense. Maybe you're making all of this up for attention. Do you think you might be hysterical? There's a real wave of feminine hysteria around these parts. Why don't you lie down for a moment?

The most popular treatment option, vibrators, won't become widely available until the early 1900s, so you're mostly stuck with prescribed bed rest. You won't leave your bed for weeks, staring at the same yellow patch of wallpaper. In theory, this sounds great. In practice, your thoughts might start to get Spicy.

If you've had enough of 19th century medicine, retrieve your time machine from behind that rock, and travel back to 2023 for some *real* medical care, go to Page 7.

If you fully embrace the hysteria and run out of the doctor's quarters in a frenzy, crashing into doorways, petticoats bunched up, go to Page 5.

If you accept the bed rest, go to Page 4.

Your bed is comfortable but you spend a lot of time lying flat on your back through the night. After a few weeks, you begin to notice sweating, aching muscles in your arms and around your knees, and headaches. You might break an occasional fever.

Here's the problem: if disease isn't caused by imbalance in the humors, it's caused by bad air. At night, everyone sleeps propped up nearly ninety degrees so they don't breathe in the dangerous night air that settles closer to the floor.

If you go back to the doctor, suspecting fever and ague, go to Page 1.

If you brush off the symptoms as nerves or more hysteria, go to Page 6.

If you keep telling yourself that the bed rest is working, go to Page 9.

You trip over a tent stake and get your leg caught in a gopher hole. The bone shatters, pokes through the skin.

If you agree to surgery, go to Page 8.

If, like a show horse, you accept that a broken leg means the need to welcome death with open arms, go to Page 6.

If you try to splint the leg yourself and wait until it heals, go to Page 4.

A bold decision. You die. What a ride this has been for all of us.

Spoiler alert: it was also malaria.

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You're sitting in a clean examination room in a modern clinic. There are no bloodstains, only scrubs that have definitely been washed with more than the occasional afterthought of cold water. Fun fact: the more blood and bodily fluids 19th century doctors got on their clothes, the better surgeons they thought they were. More enthusiastic.

The doctor, with his stethoscope and name badge, asks you if you've considered the possibility that it's all in your head.

You tell him you are so, so tired. You can barely make it up the stairs. Last week you spent four hours on a 50-minute math test and held a clump of your own hair in the shower. He tells you this is normal for your age group (growing pains, anxiety, etc.) and to maybe try going Keto.

If you hop right back into your time machine, go to Page 3.

If you agree and book a consultation for a second opinion months down the line, stay on Page 7. Read it again. Maybe something new will stand out, this time.

Germ theory is not yet realized. To prevent infection, hospitals air out wounds at midday by taking patients outside and exposing the open wounds to the sun. In the 1870s, Robert Koch will prove that certain germs cause diseases like tuberculosis. Even then, the news will take years to be implemented all the way out here.

The doctor saws off somebody's arm, wipes the saw on his pant leg, and moves on to the next patient.

Anesthesia in the form of ether was discovered in 1846, but the most likely painkillers remain alcohol or laudanum, a tincture of opium.

In 1867, Joseph Lister will present his antiseptic principles of surgery and wound care, except that's in Scotland and you're all the way out here.

You get gangrene in your leg. You pass away. It would be romantic, except your entire leg is dark green and dribbly.

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You're not cured, exactly. But you feel invigorated, full of life. You just put yourself through something terrible and came out on the other side. Whenever you close your eyes you see great-grandma Martha dancing on your closed eyelids like an animated fever dream sequence. Call it whatever you want: placebo, desperation. Maybe there's even some truth behind all these theories (or at least there is once you move past toxic metals and into medicinal tea). Whatever the reason, you feel invincible. You gather slimy rotting strawberries off the garden path and wonder if maybe you, too, will be everlasting.

END GAME.