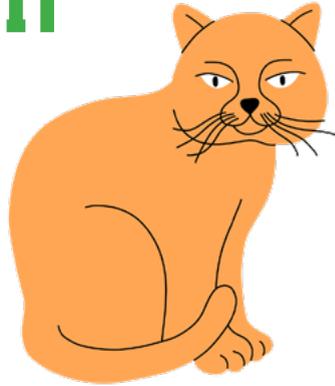


THE DOOR WITH AN IMPORTANT PART OF MY LIFE BEHIND IT

Name: **MARYNA,**
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Opening my eyes in the morning, the first thing I see are big, somewhat sunken eyes and a ginger muzzle with whiskers. This is my little – about 6 kg – beloved kitty Peaches. He is golden coloured with amber eyes, a true Brit. That’s why his second breakfast must be served no later than 9 am. If, God forbid, I should break that rule, there would be a big “bite” and a sweet morning song about the plight of the unfortunate cat forgotten by everyone.

I get up. I serve breakfast to my ginger master. My daughter is still asleep; it’s the holidays. I walk over to her bed and adjust the blanket. How quickly time flies. It’s been more than ten years since she was born. And I have no regrets that I decided to be the first person in the Republic of Belarus who got pregnant and had a baby whilst on opioid substitution therapy. There were so many fears and hopes. Misunderstanding of friends, neglect of doctors and even intimidation on their part. But eventually, a totally healthy child was born, with a lot of talents and my character (oh, I will have such a hard time with her). Beautiful, smart. She is my PRIDE.

It got me thinking; I have to get ready to go to the OST unit. **For 13 years now, every single day, I’ve been taking the same route. No weekends, heat or cold, rain or snow. I HAVE to go.** And it’s better this way than falling asleep and waking up wondering where to get money for a dose, where to prepare the injection. Yes,

I would like to go to the village where I spent my childhood at my granny’s. And I would like to go to the seaside, but...

In short, it’s complicated. I make tea for myself and my daughter, who is already awake and checking social media on her phone. The child of modern times. I get ready, make sure I have everything I need for what I have planned for today. This includes accompanying a person to Hygiene and Epidemiology Centre for tests and a visit to a surgeon at the clinic to get an appointment for an ultrasound exam of leg veins. I am a peer worker for an OST programme. A lot of people need help, and I don’t say no. I take a person into social care, and we decide together how to make their lives better.

I kiss my daughter and leave the flat. Here’s the lift; I live on the tenth floor, the entrance hallway, the courtyard – all the usual stuff. I go to the bus stop, not to the nearest one but to the one at the station. There’s bus number 8, the fastest way to get where I need to go.

I’m waiting. I must remember to buy food for the hamster and the rat. And sugar too. I drink a lot of tea; I drink it sweet. I know it’s not

healthy, but it's delicious. I'm addicted to tea. Sometimes I just want to spend a day at home, especially in winter in the cold or in autumn in the rain, with a big cup of delicious, sweet tea in front of the computer, and stay away from the street. Dreams...

Bus. Ticket collector. I'm sitting here wondering if one day I will get take-home medication. Then, I will visit my sister and godson not for a day but for a whole week.

Twenty minutes of travel go by quickly, and here comes my stop. I get off the bus. I walk across the courtyard to my unit, meeting "my fellows" on the way. I am happier now, and the sad thoughts are at the back of my mind, but they will come back. They always come back when I'm alone, even for a little while.

A few steps. A door. Another door. A small corridor. A door with an alarm, the door with an important part of my life behind it. I sit on a chair. Through the bars, I hold out a glass of water into which a nurse pours my methadone.

I drink the medicine. Yes, it's medicine for me. The medicine against prison, the medicine against shoplifting, the medicine against orphanage for my daughter...

How lucky we are to have our own medical staff! Understanding, friendly and, most importantly, they see people in us, not "junkies". Just a couple of words with the OST doctor, and you are free to go out and do your work. I have to



remember that the test is tomorrow, so I have to drink a glass of water before leaving home.

I go to the neighbouring courtyard. There are "our people" sitting on the benches. Some with juice, some with gin and tonics. It's up to everyone how they want to live their lives. At the corner of the nearest house, there are seven or nine people standing. Waiting. They're the "catch-up" people. They're about to buy some pills and go "catch the devil". Not for me; I need a clear head. I go over. I say hello. I hand out syringes. I'm also an outreach worker.

Tomorrow I am out on a shift by car. There will be HIV tests. Hopefully, they won't detect any new cases. It's hard to counsel a person after a positive test. I walk towards the benches. I hear laughter. There's a joke going on. Folks come up. There are questions, requests. A couple of hours go by like that. That's it – time to go on your own business.

It's evening. I'm home. It's 5.30 pm. I have tea and buns. My daughter flies into the flat in a whirlwind, demanding to be fed. I do it. We watch TikTok together for a while. We talk about our day.

I'm sitting at my desk. I'm filling out client cards, a peer worker's logbook. My albino rat, Manechka, is running around. She is my childhood dream come true. Dreams should come true; dreams must come true.

It's nighttime. I am still working. My daughter is asleep. She mumbles something in her sleep. It's one o'clock in the morning. Finally, I'm in bed. The rat keeps running next to me. As I fall asleep, I try to remember whether I have charged the phones, whether I have turned off the gas... And how good it is that there is OST, and I can live a normal life.

I can see my daughter grow up. I can work! I CAN JUST LIVE!!!!!!!

Maryna Korotych, Belarus

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