

## ***Should I Be Scared?***

*Excerpted from Love Stories in This Town by Amanda Eyre Ward*

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I first heard about Cipro at the potluck.

“Thank God I’ve got Cipro,” said Zelda. “My doctor prescribed it for a urinary tract infection, and I still have half the pills.”

“Cipro?” I said, my mouth full of artichoke dip.

“Honey,” said Zelda, “where have you been?”

It was a cold, clear night in Austin, Texas. After the disgusting heat of summer, the cool was a balm. Zelda wore a giant sweater, knit loosely from rough, rusty-colored wool. She stood next to the barbecue, holding her hands in front of the hot coals. In the kitchen, my husband and his scientist friends made an elaborate marinade.

“Anthrax,” whispered Zelda. She had just begun to date my husband’s thesis advisor, and lent an air of glamour to departmental potlucks.

“Excuse me?” I said. I took a large sip of wine, which had come from a cardboard box.

“Ciproflaxin,” clarified Zelda, hissing over the syllables. “It’s the anthrax vaccine. A super antibiotic. If we’re dropped on by, like, a crop duster, Cipro is what you’ll need. And,” she lowered her voice again, “there isn’t enough for everyone.”

Zelda wore scarves around her neck and held her wine glass with her hands wrapped around the bowl. When she sipped, her eyes peered over the top, bright coins. She wore high, leather boots and worked in a steel building downtown, for a company that made expensive software. She had described her job to me: “It’s an output management solution, and I market it. It connects the world.” We had no idea why

Zelda wanted to spend her evenings, which could obviously be spent in snazzier locales, with us. We wore Birkenstocks.

I was a scientist's wife. This title pleased me. I also worked at Ceramic City, where people could paint their own pottery. My title at Ceramic City was "color consultant." This title did not please me. I was trying to figure out what to do with my Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology, with a focus on the egalitarian foragers of the Kalahari Desert.

"Oh," I said to Zelda, regarding the Cipro. It was times like this that I felt lucky to have a scientist for a husband. I could ask him later for details, and he would not laugh at me. He explained things patiently, drawing circles and arrows on the margins of the newspaper.

"Hey ladies!" said a dark figure, emerging from the kitchen. It was my husband's thesis advisor. "Is that fire ready for some birds?"

Zelda smiled charmingly. The light from the coals made her look a little scary when she turned to me.

"Get some for yourself," she said in a quiet voice. "I'm serious," she said, and then she turned her face up to meet her lover's lips.

My husband explained in the dark of our bedroom that ingesting expensive antibiotics for no reason was a bad course of action. We had pulled the covers over our heads and invited the cat into the warm cave. My husband called the cat "spelunker," saying, "What do you think, little spelunker? Do you think we should let the terrorists make us afraid? Do you think we should buy canned goods and a six-day supply of

water?” (The last was in reference to my actions of the previous day, when I had arrived home with twenty-eight cans of Progresso soup and three gallons of water.)

This was the beginning of the War on Terrorism.

Two weeks before, we had discussed what to eat for dinner and if we were drinking too much beer. We had talked about having a baby, mowing the lawn, and what sort of dog we should adopt. (My husband was partial to standard poodles, and I liked little dogs that could sit in your lap or in your purse. If you carried a purse.)

In those days—which seemed impossibly bright now, untarnished—we had talked idly about what sort of fishing rod my husband should buy with his jar of quarters. My husband came home each night, took the change from his pants pocket, and dropped it into a large water jug; he claimed he had done this since he was six years old, and the first time the jug filled (right before I had met him), he bought a canoe. The canoe! He loved it ferociously. He named the canoe after me, wrote my name in Wite-Out on the side. One night, when I was reading and he was asleep, he spoke. “You’re the best,” he said, his arms around my waist, squeezing. I checked: he was in dreamland, speaking from that place. “You’re the best,” he repeated, “You’re the best, best, best canoe in the world.”

In the end, we had decided that we wanted a baby more than a dog or a fishing rod, and we had thrown away my birth control pills and made love slowly with the moon shining a soft light over us.

Things had changed so quickly and forcefully that it seemed to me my husband hadn’t quite accepted the fact that we were in danger. I lay in bed in the mornings now, hearing helicopters and listening to the morning news.

“Your dad is making fun of me,” I told the cat under the covers. I began to cry a little, and my husband said he was sorry.

The next morning, from behind the counter at Ceramic City, I called Dr. Fern. The first time the nurse answered, I hung up. I was alone in Ceramic City, but I did not know what to say to the nurse. Was I being crazy? I wanted to think so. My mother, who lived in Connecticut and had gone to three funerals for her friends’ sons, told me that it was unpatriotic to want some Cipro for myself. When I told her I was afraid to get out of bed, she said, “That’s just how the terrorists want you to feel.”

I called Dr. Fern again. This time, when the nurse answered, I said that I would like to make an appointment.

“Issue?” said the nurse.

“Excuse me?” I said. A man peeked into the window of Ceramic City. I thought, Fuck.

“What is the issue,” said the nurse, “that you need to see the doctor about?”

“Uh, I’d like to get a prescription,” I said.

“For?”

“For Ciproflaxin,” I said. The peeking man came inside and began to wander around, inspecting Personalized Pottery.

“Beg pardon?” said the nurse. Was she instructed not to use full sentences?

“In case of an anthrax attack on America,” I said, “I would like to have my own supply of antibiotics.” The man held a blue bowl painted with fish. He stared at me.

“Oh my,” said the nurse.

“Well, so,” I said. I put my hand over the mouthpiece. “Can I be of assistance?” I asked the man.

“My wife’s birthday is Tuesday,” he said.

“One moment, please,” I said. The nurse told me that she would have to consult with the doctor and get back to me. She took my number. When I hung up the phone, the man had put the bowl back on the shelf.

“Should I be scared?” he asked.

The nurse called later that afternoon and explained in no uncertain terms that the doctor would not give me the drugs I had requested. She added that it was against every tenet of the medical establishment to prescribe drugs when a patient was not ill. I hung up the phone, instead of saying, “You self-important bitch.” At home that evening, I cried again.

My husband watched me skeptically. We were eating Freebird burritos, sitting on our front porch and peeling off aluminum foil in small, metal circles. “We’re not going to get anthrax,” said my husband. He made a sound that I would classify as an incredulous snort.

“I know!” I said. I bit into my burrito, which I had ordered with extra guacamole. Extras were a dollar, and usually I refrained, but I had the feeling that I should live life to the fullest, and make a celebration of every day.

“And I want you to stop watching so much television,” said my husband. He had been talking, it seemed, for some time. I nodded, and he turned his head toward me, squinting as if I were a scientific mystery. “Oh, honey,” he said.

Nonetheless, I did watch television that night after my husband had fallen asleep. I sat in the front room in my pajamas, watching bombs and food rations fall. I drank a warm glass of milk and watched dirty children rip open bags of Pop-Tarts and jam them in their mouths.

The next day, I discovered an advertisement for Cipro on the back page of the *Austin Chronicle*. There it was, sandwiched between a massage therapist and a Spanish tutor: CIPRO AVAILABLE 1-800-CIPRONOW. (The last “W,” it seemed, was for effect.) Ceramic City was empty again, and I picked up the phone.

When I got home that evening, my husband was making linguine with clams. There was an open bottle of wine on the table, and two wine glasses. My husband had gone to some trouble: cloth napkins, the whole nine yards. In the kitchen, he was stirring dinner and leafing through a fishing catalog. I came into the kitchen and put my arms around him. “I’m your apron,” I said.

“Look at this,” said my husband, pointing to the catalog. “A baby-sized fishing rod. I can take our little boy out in the canoe.”

“Or our little girl,” I said.

“Whatever,” said my husband. “Either way, the change jar is now officially for the baby. For a little fishing rod, or maybe a little life vest.”

As we ate the linguine, which was delicious, I brought up the Cipro. I explained that the pills we needed to stay alive for a week would cost \$300. My husband put down his napkin, and looked at the table. He unclenched his fists and placed each hand

carefully on either side of his plate. Finally, he lifted his head. He took a breath, and I saw him make the decision to act rationally. “We don’t have any money,” he said.

“Well,” I said, “we do have the change jar.” My husband nodded, his eyes closed. “If we die of anthrax,” I said, “what will a fishing vest be good for?” Even I could tell I sounded hysterical. We sat in silence and finished the bottle of wine. My husband then stood up and left the room. He came back with the jar, which he overturned. Years of change spilled over the floor.

“It happened without them knowing,” I said. “I want to be ready.”

My husband did not look at me. He sat cross-legged on the floor and began counting. The change jar added up to one hundred seventy-two dollars and sixteen cents.

“What are we going to do?” I said.

“Just get half,” said my husband. “Save yourself,” he said. And then he went and took the sleeping bag from the closet, and he placed it on the couch.

“I’ll get enough for both of us, for three days,” I said. “Three days will be enough to figure something out.” I stood next to the couch, where my husband was feigning sleep. “I’m just asking for three days,” I said, “I don’t think that’s unreasonable.”

The man at 1-800-CIPRONOW had told me to meet him in the alley between San Antonio and Sixth. I drove there the next morning, a plastic bag of change in the passenger seat. “You’ll be glad,” I told my husband. “You’ll thank me later.”

The CIPRONOW man was Hispanic. He wore tight Wrangler jeans and a T-shirt with an American flag. Over the phone, he had explained that the Cipro was his mother's prescription; she needed money more than the drugs.

The man, whose flag shirt, upon closer inspection, was not very clean, was unhappy about splitting up the prescription. "What you need," he said, "is the full thirty pills. Three times a day for ten days. That's what you need."

"I'm sorry," I said, gesturing to the bag. "This is all I have."

"All you have," said the man, and he laughed. I blinked. "No deal," said the man, shaking his head.

"Well, fuck," I said. The change bag and I drove away.

That evening...

**Read more in *Love Stories in This Town*.**