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## Mr. Sweet-and-Awful

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## Mr. Sweet-and-Awful

I spent nearly the entire day dialing my old contacts to get as many dangerous prescription drugs as I could: Darvocet, Codeine, Vicodin, Demerol, Percocet, Ultram—I wasn't going to half-ass this whole "killing myself" thing. Most people don't think it through. They take a handful of acetaminophen and chase it with a glass of white wine because they think that's how Jimi did it, and "coincidentally" their neighbor pops in minutes after they've passed out and hysterically drags them to the hospital. One kid back in college swallowed two bottles of Children's Robitussin while his roommate was at the library and passed out on the phone with the Suicide Hotline. The paramedics had to pump his stomach in front of everyone so he wouldn't go into a coma.

"Fuckin' Children's Robitussin," I say to myself, or I think I say. No one looks up. Maybe I only thought it. I'm starting to feel pretty fucked up. I already took a few pills—enough to trip, but not enough to knock me out. I pulled the "request stop" cord what seemed like a while back, but I can't really be sure exactly how long ago. I don't wear a watch anymore. And besides, these pills are making everything sort of slow down.

I hate the bus, but I have to ride it. Everyone does—no one that isn't rich drives a car anymore. Gasoline is scarce and expensive. But the buses, with their obnoxious diesels, don't even need fossil fuels to run. When the city ran out of money, they started requesting used fry-oil donations from fast-food places. Turns out Diesel engines, without alterations, can run entirely on that syrupy shit in which they soak your starches and meat patties and mechanically-separated chicken to make it eleven-plus times more likely to constipate your aorta, and when it's combusted the stuff has no detectable malicious effect on the atmosphere. They can't sell it to anyone, because it's classified as

“waste,” and they won’t give the stuff to civilians anymore because they get these huge tax breaks for donating it to the government.

And even though those crooked oil guys are out, the scandals are just as bad with the restaurant-folk. The city comptroller publicly admitted to getting kickbacks from burger joints, shortly after publicly denying it, and the mayor got caught giving hand-jobs to teenage fast-food employees in public restrooms and was forced to resign, sans criminal charges, though now he makes more than triple his mayor salary as the CEO of a tri-state subsidiary of a transnational conglomerate.

The breaks squeak loudly then puff and the door creaks and flaps and cold air whisks right into my face and I wince and stand, wobble, nod to the driver as he says something unintelligible, and say “Why thank you dear sir,” exit, and look around at what looks like endless gray bricks paralleled by an equally infinite strip of painted asphalt that’s separated by a narrow median of dirt with a miniscule number of grass-blades jutting out. The bus chugs down the road. This is not my part of town.

I could be unconscious on my sofa and foaming at the mouth right now, but I’m stuck here in who-the-hell-knows-ville with just this half-bottle of water and a whole mess of drugs that, when combined, will eat at my liver like termites on redwood. I open the bag and scoop out a handful, shove them in my mouth like Skittles, then take several gulps from the bottle. It’s almost empty, but I can swallow one or two at a time dry no problem.

The trick is to stay awake, swallow as many pills as you can, get the job done. That’s why I’m still walking, staggering more like it, through this wasteland. Besides the road and sidewalk there isn’t much. Abandoned strip-malls mostly, with those big windows I pressed my face against as a kid, to see what they were building in there. But no one’s building in these units. They look like enormous, semi-carpeted prison cells but without the bed or toilet or that sheet of metal they weld on that’s supposed to pass for a mirror. You can almost imagine the stores, the people, inside the commercial husks—but now they house only ghosts, or at least the illusion of ghosts, behind those rusted For Lease signs.

I stop when I see some kid around the corner throwing some orange-and-white pile against the wall again and again—it looks like a

small mammal, but he's tossing it like a tomahawk, by what must be its tail, and it spins like one too. He does it four or five times before he sees me, watching him.

"Hey," I say. "Hey you!" He picks up the critter, and holds it close to his scrawny chest. He yells something in Spanish, I think, but I can't understand so I walk toward him, slowly at first, then jogging and wildly waving my arms.

"Marcha atrás puta blanca," I hear him say, but I don't stop. He chucks the creature near my feet and pivots around, briefly sprints, and disappears behind the building. I stare at the pile of ragged fur, and see that this, well cat I guess, has been dead for a while. Days maybe. That brainsick brat must have killed it or discovered it rotting in a gutter and has been fucking with it, just as some kind of deranged experiment to test the fabric of life.

The image makes me sick—like physically sick. I retch all over the cat. I can't help it. Its guts are all spilt out like the tauntaun in Empire, only not so fresh. There's some indiscernible point where the intestines end and the maggots begin, and I'm sure the cat once had fur covering the bald patches on its tail, and the skin around its mouth has deteriorated so badly it appears to be perpetually screaming with silence. As if death weren't degrading enough.

I don't want some kid like this to find me lying somewhere, maybe making my final convulsions, and decide to strip me down and prod my cadaver as some deranged way to discover the what the hell this life thing is about anyway. He would make me into some disgusting story to tell his hick friends down at the polluted quarry: "Did I ever tell ya'll 'bout da time I poked dat dead dude?" he might say, then he'd prance around with his hand extended out and twisting as if he were poking the air with an invisible stick.

I examine my vomit, I have to squint, and count how many pills came up. When I look at them for too long they each kind of split so it looks like there are two instead of one, but I'm pretty sure there are twelve in total. Twelve's not bad. I should pop some more though. Sit down to open the bag. Swallow a few dry. Just rest a moment. Suck last drips from water bottle. Keep one eye open. Stay Awake.

When I remember the last time I saw Tasha, sitting there on that barstool three towns away in perhaps the deepest diving bar I've seen,

it's like I can hear and see and smell everything that happened, like I'm replaying it in the back of my mind on some kind of multi-sensory biological Betamax. She orders her drink straight and up and dirty with extra fruit.

"Cygnum," she says to me, chewing an olive, "did you tell anyone about us?"

"Well," I say, "no."

"Are you sure?" she says. "For chrissake, if you said anything you need to tell me. Seriously."

"Oh. Um. I might have told Mark." She knows Mark, or at least she's met him. He's a longtime pub pal. And it wasn't like I might have told him—I certainly did—but it never seems so much like me when my blood-alcohol percentage is that high.

"What the hell?" she says, trying to do that thing that women do when they want to scold you but don't want anyone else to hear, and it's like a whisper but it's as loud as if she were speaking in her normal voice. "What's wrong with you? Why would you tell Mark?"

"He's my friend," I say. "Don't worry, he won't say anything. I trust him."

"Well I trusted you, and you told Mark." She sighs then gulps the vodka martini in front of her. It's got all this stuff floating inside, like clouds of dust. I think maybe it's salt.

"I had to tell someone," I say. "I can't just sit at home all day thinking to myself how awful I am. I thought someone else should know."

"Jesus Christ," she says, putting her hand to her face, as if the information has caused her head to painfully swell. "Ter is going to find out if you keep telling everyone. He'll fucking kill you if he finds out."

"I know," I say. Terry, or Ter as she calls him, hasn't killed anyone before, and as far as I know has never had the desire to kill anyone, and especially not me, but we all know that he could. "I know he will. But I couldn't help it. It's just—well, I guess I've been thinking about you a lot, and—"

"Cyg," she says and sighs. "I'm married."

"I know," I say. "I know you are."

It wasn't me Terry killed though. His mother found him in his childhood bedroom with a giant hole in the back of his head. He had to move back in with her when Tasha filed for divorce and then a week

later he got arrested for drunkenly crashing his Ford Taurus into a police cruiser going fifteen miles per hour—he fell asleep at the wheel with a half-drunk beer-bottle in the cup-holder.

He used his dead dad's Remington peppergun to do it, pulled the trigger with his toe. I didn't go to the funeral, and I heard Tasha skipped it too. But of course she wouldn't go—I heard she's already engaged to someone else, already pregnant too. And it's not like it would help anyone if I showed up. If I tell him what I did, he won't hear me, and if I tell him "I'm sorry," it would be only for my own sake.

He called me a little while back.

"Hey man, it'll be okay," I told him.

"..."

"Things jut work out in the end. At least that's how it's gone so far."

"Yeah," he said, "I guess that's true."

"You just got to, you know, hang in there. Like that cat on the branch." That was the advice my dad always gave me. Hang in there.

"Gee. Thanks."

Can't afford rent? Hang in there, buddy.

Arrested for DUI? Just hang on in there.

Want to blow your brains out? Wouldn't you rather just hang there?

"Terry thinks I'm at my sister's," Tasha says facing me from outside the door. "Got anything to drink?" This isn't the first time she's been here. She and Terry would come over, before Gwen moved out, and we would slam beers and then margs and all of us would play "Drinking" Apples to Apples or watch romantic comedies and trashy reality television or walk down to the Pub and toss darts.

"All I have is some vodka," I say. I step back and she steps inside. "And whiskey." I back into the kitchen and watch her shut the door. "And gin." I open the fridge. "And beer, but that's it." She puts her finger to her bottom lip, like she's thinking about what she wants, like she doesn't already know. "And wine."

She's wearing a sparkling beige tank top and ridiculously tight jeans with sequins on the back pockets and her eye shadow glistens under the light and even her perfume smells like glitter. She pokes a white-filtered cigarette between her lips, and I glance a red handprint on her freckled forearm. "I need a light," she says.

I open a bottle of merlot and we sit at the kitchen table. I scrape the phosphoric tip of a match across the matchbox sandpaper. She leans forward, grasps my thigh for balance, and plunges the tip of her white stick into the hot flare. Smoke gently seeps through her lips and into her nostrils. We finish the entire bottle of wine, then rinse our stemmed glasses and fill them halfway with vodka and ice.

“It feels good,” I say. “You know, just the two of us. I feel more relaxed.”

“Oh,” she says, “and why is that?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “When it was the four of us, Gwen always seemed so antsy, and Terry was always pissed off.” Tasha nods slowly and sips vodka from her wineglass. “When it’s just us, it’s like we’re free to say anything we want to each other. And do anything we want to each other.”

She stubs her cigarette-butt in the glass ashtray. “Are you coming onto me, Cygy?” she says as she pushes her breasts toward me and bites her lower lip.

“If I am, it’s only because you came onto me first,” I say and lean toward her. Our tongues nearly collide and our shirts seem to evaporate and then we unbutton each other’s jeans and grip and rub and then we fuck right there on the table. Then again on the couch. Then we abandon our drinks and climb the stairs naked and kissing and when we get to the bed that’s where she gets wild and scratches my chest and bites me hard on the neck.

She smokes a cig after and tells me that she never wants to have a child with Terry, but that she would have one with someone else, as like a way to convince me that they would eventually get divorced.

The next morning though, when we embrace by her car and she cries into my shoulder, she says, “That was a mistake. We shouldn’t have done that.”

Terry’s the guy that first got me into prescription drugs. In high school he would steal three-hundred-milligram Codeine pills from his mother’s medicine cabinet and we’d crush them up in his basement on encyclopedias with a spoon and use our vertical ID cards to scrape the powder into lines and snort it with five-dollar bills. When it got late enough we would sneak out of the house and split a case of unfortunate-tasting beer and a crudely rolled joint as we walked

around his upper-middle class white suburban neighborhood. At cul-de-sacs we often sat on the burgundy woodchips and smoked what we called “sweet and awful” cigars, the thick smoke of which we tried to inhale to get a heavier buzz.

The night we talk about death, it’s cold enough that the beers we’re slamming have bits of slush mixed up with the foam, which is cold in the mouth, but warms from the esophagus out. “I hope I die with one of these in my hand,” Terry says as he looks down at his can of Miller High Life. I look at it too.

“I think I’d rather die doing something cooler,” I say, “like skydiving. Or getting stabbed to death in a knife fight.” I shake my beer-can; it sounds absent of drinkable liquid, so I toss it into the snow near someone’s delicately arranged evergreen bushes.

“Yeah, knife fight would be cool,” says Terry. “But you could be drinking a beer during the knife fight.”

“I’m sure there’s no rule against it,” I say. I pull out my pack of small cigars and hand one to Terry. “What do you think it’ll be like? You know, after.” I bite down on the off-white plastic filter and spark my lighter.

Terry stops walking and takes a moment to light his too. He inhales the smoke, which makes his voice sound weird when he says, “You mean after the knife fight?” and we continue to walk.

“Well, yeah, like after you die,” I say and open Terry’s backpack, take out two more beers and hand one to Terry.

He puts his cigar between his teeth and snaps open his beer-can, removes the stogie with one hand, puts the can to his lips, tilts his head back for a long swill, then belches. “Nothing,” he says.

I look over at him. He’s staring at the ground in front of him and he looks pretty fucked up. “What do you mean?” I say.

He uses his cigar hand to gesture and says, “You’re there, you’re alive—then suddenly you aren’t. You just lose consciousness and you never wake up. It might be like you’re asleep, maybe you dream for a while. But eventually it ends. You just end.” He takes another drink from his beer-can.

“Shit,” I say, “that’s bleak.” I sniff sharply and I can feel bits of leftover Codeine powder dripping down my throat.

Terry shrugs and puffs.

“It could be worse though,” I say. “Like if you had to relive the



last five minutes of your life for eternity, just that last bit of distress and agony right before you die, right when you realize it's about to happen, like when the guy fatally knifes you and blood shoots out. And you know how they say 'your life flashes before your eyes' or whatever? What if it's just all the worst things that you can remember, everything horrible you've ever done or that have been done unto you, the darkest images and emotions and thoughts, and at the moment of death, when you think 'Finally it's all over,' it just starts up again. Your last horrible memory is of your death, and in that memory you remember seeing everything again—the cycle perpetuates itself, forever.”

Terry empties his beer down his throat, puts the can in someone's mailbox, then looks at me and says, “You're pretty fucked up man.”

So now I've got this sandwich-sized Zip-Loc bag in my jacket pocket. I roll them around through the bag with my fingers, and I can tell that the few I've already swallowed have taken hold. My hands, and the guilt, have numbed, and everything seems kind of stranger than before, curvier, as if I'm surrounded by a crystal globe.

This girl on the bus almost looks like Tasha—burnt-blonde hair, light freckles, long eyelashes. I'm remembering what it was like to kiss her, and I can see as if from outside the window the two of us laying on my bed with her on top of me and we're naked and now it's like I can look down at my hands wrapped mostly around her waist, thumbs so close they nearly touch and now we're thrusting and gasping and she moans and whispers things like Oh yes in my ear, and I've been thinking about this for a while, and it's almost like it's real, and when the scene dissipates I'm glad it's not Tasha.

Likely we wouldn't even speak. She's moved on, met someone else, forgotten Terry, forgotten me. Though I can't forget—only remember, only partake in pills as once I did with Terry, only grieve his demise with my own self-induced quietus, only join club *felo-de-se*, commit the lone activity that mankind simultaneously considers among the most honorable and the most cowardly.

The driver decreases the velocity of the bus. “Even though I don't drive fast,” he says iambically, “I hope that you all had a blast.” No one says anything, or laughs, or even acknowledges that the driver has just spoken. I stand then step, step, step and grab the yellow-and-black-

striped vertical bar.

“Hey man,” I say to the driver. He has short dreadlocks and wears small, circular, rimless glasses and the same shirt and pants as every driver in town. “Thanks a lot.” I step off, the bus rumbles down the barren street, barren like the stark dirt and naked trees and dyspnoeic air. I scoop more pills in my mouth, like candy. Though I’ve been here before, this is not my part of town.