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## St. Miltrude's

Jim grabbed a can of root beer for his suicide. He wasn't particularly big on sassafras or licorice, but drink choices were limited. The tap water at St. Miltrude's Home for the Insane and Elderly was notorious for its eggy flavor. Mellow Yellow was tasty, but the potassium citrate was known to have undesirable drug interactions. Coke was the obvious front runner, except one of the residents had recently thrown every last can of it off the roof in protest of an earlier bed time.

The conciliatory can of root beer jostled with the rest of the supplies on Jim's janitorial cart as he pushed it down St. Mili's labyrinth of hallways, mercifully quiet during the small hours. A jacket was the next item on the grisly scavenger hunt, because nobody wanted to die cold.

Perhaps surprising to some, a bleak occupation in a bleak setting wasn't the catalyst behind Jim's decision to end his life. He wasn't bitter or depressed; he wasn't heartbroken or mad at the government. Jim had simply made the classic mistake of thinking about it all too much. He'd always been of the suspicion that if one gave it too much thought, it being the why of it all, those thoughts would inevitably lead to suicide, or at least an absence of reasons not to do it. He'd gone in search of meaning and come up short, and this was pro-level stuff he was contemplating. The defeated janitor would've done well to stick to simpler, less fatal issues like why the bee makes honey or why yellow traffic lights were curiously but definitely getting shorter.

Jim trudged into the depths of the coatroom, battling a standoffish daddy long legs for nearly a minute before emerging with his white winter parka. He laid the poofy-bag-of-marshmallows jacket atop the root beer, and pushed his cart to the last stop: the pharmacy.

Because of his plentiful experience with cleaning up other people's messes and an affinity for his boss, Nurse Gail, Jim had elected to go by pill overdose. It was clean, quiet, and showed respect for the party that was to discover the body.

With an extensive roster of patients in desperate need of daily medication, St. Mili's pharmacy was a Mecca of dozens of drugs that, when taken in excess, resulted in reliable death. Jim unlocked the mother of all medicine cabinets, perused its dizzying supply of amber bottles, and plucked the relatively obscure and verbally intimidating dikatharide olanzapine. Conventionally used to combat the dreaded tag team of paranoia and psychosis, the drug didn't cause nausea (again, he really wanted this to be an easy clean up) and with its high levels of liver-busting haloperidol, a successful overdose was all but guaranteed.

Jim parked the supply cart in front of his bedroom door, sandwiched between the king-of-ambient-noise boiler room and a storage closet that no one used because a) the door was jammed, and b) it smelled like a wet dog chewing black licorice.

Inside his bedroom at last, Jim locked the door and set the lamp on dim, considering. He sat cross-legged in the center bouquet of his flower-patterned rug, donned his marshmallow jacket, and

opened his forced-compromise can of root beer. The angry sound of freed carbonation joined a faint rendition of “O Canada” from a dementia-plagued geriatric on the floor above.

Making what he assumed would be his last choice, Jim decided to put liquid in before pills as opposed to the other way around (a traditionally benign but of course hotly-debated topic among the unpredictably opinionated residents of St. Mili’s). He sipped some root beer and lifted the pills to their manufacturer-unapproved destiny.

It was at this moment, in a statistically improbable stroke of luck, that the knob of Jim’s locked door quivered.

While the name might suggest to some that St. Militrude’s Home for the Insane and Elderly catered to geriatrics who’d long ago abandoned reason and reality (and indeed these people were among the residents), the unique institution was actually two formerly separate entities that had since merged: Silver Years Retirement Home and The South Idaho Mental Health Center.

Hastily built by the state in response to an eight-person killing spree by a disgruntled bank teller armed with a windsock full of pennies, The South Idaho Mental Health Center had initially enjoyed a healthy annual budget from the state. Unfortunately, even a tragedy as gruesome as the one perpetrated by “The Lincoln Head Lunatic” (Teton Valley Press, 23 April, 1972) had a shelf life in the taxpayer consciousness. After several years without another “Spare Change Killing Spree” (Boise Examiner, 23 April, 1972), the public’s interest in the project waned, and with it waned the funds. The very week the Health Center was to be shuttered, Silver Years Retirement Home burned down just six miles away, killing thirty-five of its stasis-prone residents after a hot plate short circuited during a safety demonstration by the local fire chief. Devil-smirking irony melted alongside cardigan into flesh.

Where some see only tragedy, others are able to see opportunity.

Moneymen abhor a vacuum, and they have deadlines to meet. So as sure as the bee makes honey and yellow traffic lights were curiously but definitely getting shorter, the interests of business found one another and decided a potential symbiotic relationship existed between the two parties in crisis. Thus, capitalistically willed into existence: St. Militrude’s.

The name St. Militrude’s (no canonical record exists for any saint named Militrude, nor any record of the name Militrude, regardless of piety) was deemed applicable to both sides, and so the marriage was born with the impressive combined body count of forty-three.

Jim spat out the pills in surprise as he choked on the root beer, forcing the caustic brown liquid into his sinuses. No one had ever bothered him in his room before. Ever.

Through watery eyes he again saw the doorknob strain. This time the unseen party kept a steady pressure on the knob until the cheap mechanism gave way. The tumbler lock rocketed straight past Jim’s right ear and exploded the lamp on his nightstand, plunging the room into darkness.

The lockless door swung open, revealing an armoire-sized man clad in a seafoam green robe and white athletic socks, knee high. He had a formidable presence even at a clearly advanced age, flirting with seven feet in height. He was thick—not fat, but thick—like a generous slab of lean beef. The robust hair atop his head was a tangled forest of gray and white, descending to the bottom of his taut

and scarred face in a magnificent beard, giving him the unmistakable look of the Ancient Greek head honcho, Zeus.

“Oz,” Jim coughed through the root beer still fizzing in his nose.

Ozymandias was a mysterious resident of St. Mili’s that went exclusively by Oz because, as he put it: “Anyone foolish enough to think I have time for a five syllable name isn’t worth talking to.”

For as long as he’d been at St. Mili’s, Oz had only eaten one meal a day and always the exact same thing: a raw 32 oz. tenderloin followed by a bowl of black cherries (he’d chew and swallow the pits) all chased with a gallon of raw whole milk (“Keep Louis Pasteur and his goddamned microwave away from my dairy.”). Wildly popular with the other residents, Oz somehow managed to get a smile out of even the most splenetic of subjects, and halved the number of attempted arsons by the end of his first week. The man had no filter, and it seemed all of his feelings were pushed to opposite ends of the spectrum, not unlike a drunkard. When things were great, he made sure everyone knew it. When they weren’t, it was best to keep your distance.

Unlike the general population at St. Mili’s, Oz was actually kind to Jim, even if the two weren’t overly close. Lately, Jim had caught Oz gazing at him with great intensity. It wasn’t a creepy, trenchcoat perv vs. high school girl type leer—more like a bug scientist with a Mason jar: careful inspection belying a growing admiration.

“Hello, Jim!” Oz boomed, his icy blue eyes ever alight with the intensity of either extreme compassion or extreme malice.

“Oz,” Jim repeated stupidly, getting to his feet.

Oz rushed into the room without invitation and knifed his hands under Jim’s armpits, easily tossing the janitor to his feet. “All those years of toil without recognition, labor without purpose, and effort without aim are about to come together. The culmination of the pinnacle! All those times you probably thought about killing yourself— but didn’t— are about to pay off!”

“Oz, can this wait—”

“It absolutely cannot wait. We’re late. The bastard’s found his Operator and we’re late. Follow me downstairs, please.” Despite the facade of a request, Oz pushed Jim out of the room with no explanation of who the bastard in question was, or what he was getting an operation for.

The door closed on root beer and pills spilled across the rug like the unclaimed pot of a broke pharmacist’s poker game. Shock at the improbability of Oz’s timing rendered Jim speechless and unable to formulate an effective argument against cooperating. The pair traversed the grounds undisturbed, the residents all retired to or locked inside their respective bedrooms.

Jim knew every crummy inch of St. Mili’s. Every creaky step, every scrambled television channel, every crack in the wall where patients liked to hide their pornography (mostly crude drawings done by the residents themselves with hair-raising anatomical inaccuracies). He knew all the smells of burnt coffee, of aged and decaying skin, of re-reheated meatloaf, of rubbing alcohol, musk cologne, and expired prune juice. He knew all the sounds of night terror screams, unmotivated laughter, racial slurs (both time-tested and newly-invented), threats (both annoyingly-vague and alarmingly-specific), and the singing voice of the old Québécois man on the third floor who tragically knew only the first two words of his favorite song: the Canadian national anthem.

After a few more minutes of winding staircases and long hallways that described an unsolvable maze, Jim spoke up. “Oz . . . I don’t have time for this right now.” Not even the suicidal like to have their time wasted.

“You have a better offer?” Oz asked, and mimed blowing his brains out since suicide by overdose didn’t translate well to pantomime. “Okay, kinda rude, but just follow me and shut your mouth, that’s a lad.”

They descended a stairwell Jim had never been down before. But that was impossible.

He knew St. Mili’s top to bottom, northsouth to eastwest.

Impossible, and yet, here they were.

“Here we are,” Oz said as the stairs ended at a door the same faded green as his robe. He pulled a tarnished brass key from his pocket and solved his lock problem more traditionally than before. “No need to stand on ceremony!” Oz grabbed the front of Jim’s jacket and, with seemingly no effort, tossed him inside.

Fluorescent lights ignited on the ceiling in a pathetic attempt at unanimity, tracing detail into a massive, black-barked mulberry tree that towered above Jim, who was supine on a dewy floor of lush grass. Born from innumerable husky roots, the great tree stood the height of the room, branches sprawling across the ceiling in a pattern almost identical to the roots below. Among the tree’s leaves were the elongated black-red berries of its namesake, as well as an impressive range of deadly weapons: an indigenously hard to pinpoint peacock-feathered spear, a plaid Uzi, a fraying cargo net filled with a dozen Claymore mines (embossed with “FRONT TOWARD ENEMY OR OTHERWISE ANNOYING”), and many more deadly tools of every age, from dulled arrowheads to a poorly sealed container of yellowcake uranium. Also dangling among the weapons were objects whose function was less clear: a cracked, brass monocular with a glued-on lens cap, a lumpy, marble sack embroidered with a winking smiley face, a bejeweled spider pendant confusingly adorned with a snake tongue and scorpion tail, a pair of winged sneakers hanging from tied shoelaces (like one might find on telephone wires in the troublemaker parts of town), and finally, a nice hat.

“You may pick one Asset,” Oz said.

“Huh?” Jim said, brimming with specificity and insight.

“You’re starting your training. Goddamn, that makes it sound awful. That’s what it is, I suppose, but really it’s all a great adventure. I had fun with it . . . most of the time.”

Questions. So many questions. “Oz, I—”

“Hold on, my boy. There’s no point in the two of us standing in this dank basement, me trying to convince you what is about to happen is about to happen and you not believing me until it does. If it’s all the same to you, I’d just as soon have occurrences justify themselves, and we can discuss the finer points afterward. It’s all part of the game.”

“What game?”

“Cryptofauna.” A compassionate/malicious twinkle came and left Oz’s eyes before Jim could correctly categorize it. “Now, an Asset. If you please,” Oz nodded toward the stuff-laden tree.

Jim’s brain finally caught up to the events surrounding it. By most accounts he should’ve been a stiff by now, or at least in the throes of a muted and anti-climactic death. Instead, he’d followed a man affectionately known as Cherry-Eater down a staircase that shouldn’t have existed, into a subterranean

arboretum housing a fruit tree decorated with the ornaments of a warlord's Christmas tree. The slot machine of emotion in Jim's chest finally settled on . . . curiosity.

Even if this bizarre room didn't compensate for the emptiness of existence, it was novel, and novelty had great power, if only for a brief time. Jim reasoned he could always kill himself tomorrow and cautiously approached the tree, carefully evaluating the items without any reference or standard.

The marble pouch with the winking face.

Jim stretched to unhook the bag from its branch then reached inside and pulled out not marbles, but a handful of granulated dust. The alien powder slipped weightlessly through the cracks in his grasp. He turned to Oz for an explanation.

"You could do worse. Tie it around your wrist," Oz said. "Now, one last thing before you begin. You must call into the hollow."

"The what?"

"The hollow, my boy." Oz pointed a thick finger at the tree's trunk.

Just below a booby-trapped microscope and a dignity-shaped bong yawned a gaping hole among the massive tangle of roots.

"It's unwise, some might say completely witless, to journey alone," Oz said. "If you're lucky, it'll have fur. That's good for heat when you're stranded in the Andes or, y'know, wherever."

Jim stared at Oz, his expression blank.

"A Companion!" Oz shouted. "You need a Companion to join you. Now call into the hollow before I slap you across the room."

Sensing Oz would likely be true to his word, Jim stuck his head inside the hollow. He heard nothing but a dull echo, as if the chamber inside were larger than the tree trunk and the basement it was in. Much larger.

"Hello?" His voice cracked mortifyingly.

"Come on god damnit!" Oz roared. "Give the beast a chance!"

"HELLO?"

A pitter patter of rapidly moving paws echoed before a dog burst from the hollow and knocked Jim off his feet.

"Well now," Oz said, "—a fine pairing indeed!"

The dog was a mutt about the size of a dingo, but definitely not a dingo. Tire-fire-smoke black fur ran from tail to nose. The animal was so dark it might have been mistaken for a silhouette were it not for a pair of red-iris eyes, friendly despite their demonic color. One ear stood erect, the other flopped forward in involuntary penance, bobbing in sync with the animal's nimble stride.

"Name him," Oz said.

"Mars," Jim replied easily.

"Would you look at that . . ." The giant surveyed the new duo with parental approval, his left eye threatening a tear before he managed to compose himself.

Mars eagerly sniffed every nook in the tree's roots, narrowly avoiding a tail sting from the mechanized snake-spider-scorpion pendant.

"Call him here," Oz said.

"Mars." The dog ran straight to Jim and sat, sniffing at the ash pouch.

“There now, everything’s in order. Not much to go on initially, but that’s kind of the point.” Oz reached up and picked two mulberries from the tree. “One for you and one for the mutt.”

“Oz. What’s going on?” Jim demanded as frustration finally wrestled wonder into submission.

“The point is not to be told. The point is to experience. So stop asking. The humble mulberry helps one travel without nausea.”

“I thought that was ginger.”

“To hell with ginger! Ginger is for amateurs!”

Jim wasn’t sure why he did it. When one is at death’s door, eating berries from a near-stranger isn’t necessarily commonplace—but it’s also not unreasonable. He ate the berry and offered the other to Mars, who gobbled it up with the blind trust of a dog.

“How did you know to come to my room tonight? I mean you . . . knew something, right?” Jim mumbled, the berry’s sour juice strangling his taste buds.

“There will be time to talk of that later. Just know that where you’re going now, I won’t be present to stay your hand. So don’t . . . I can’t loosen the noose again.” Without warning, Oz rolled up Jim’s left pant leg and gave a disapproving sigh. “We don’t have time to get you a proper pair of socks. I suppose those will do for now. What are they? Cotton blend? Whatever. There’s a conveyance under the sheet in the corner. Go to it.”

Jim held a stern look on Oz. This was insane. Even for your-crazy-is-our-normal St. Militrude’s, this was insane.

The janitor could defer the sprouting fractal of questions in his brain, but the longer he put it off, the worse it would ultimately be, like the time he’d put off cleaning a departed resident’s room for a month, only to find she had a habit of hiding fruitcake behind the radiator. His tongue recalled the taste memory without being asked and he gagged.

Oz sensed a potential mental revolt in the young man before him. “It’s my last ask of you. We’ve come too far for you to shit the bed now, to screw the pooch—”

Jim held up a warning hand. He’d come across both referenced incidents on the job that very year, and just as with the fuzzy fruitcake memory, he preferred repression.

“Last ask,” Oz repeated, raising his hand like a Boy Scout.

Jim turned to the supposed conveyance. On the far side of the room a green sheet (seafoam, of course) tented a pointed object the height of any self-respecting coat rack.

“What is it?” Jim asked as he approached. Mars proved immediate utility by yanking down the goofy-looking roll in Jim’s pant leg and then the green sheet, revealing a reflective, black obelisk. Fluorescent light shimmered clumsily across the glassy surface, giving the statue a soft mint glow. At the bottom of the statue three abaci had been set to 48.87, -123.39, and 2,000.00. “Oz? What is it?” Jim repeated.

“Well it’s obsidian, isn’t it?” Oz said from somewhere behind.

As humans are wont to do, Jim reached a hand out to touch. Mars mimed his Companion’s movement with a black paw.

“I’ll be thinking of you, my boy,” Oz said. “Care for your socks. And remember, only the painter will get you back. It’s on you to discover why I’ve made the connection.” Oz’s voice resonated in Jim’s

head. But it was no longer near; the words echoed from impossibly far away then drowned in a quicksand of absolute silence.

All around was darkness—inside the heart of a scuba diving sinner exploring a pool of crude oil at midnight.

The feeling of being spread in every direction came to Jim, as if two panes of glass were determined to pancake his body into the second dimension. Then, simply and completely, he felt himself invert. The blackness began to recede. Sound returned but was nothing more than the deafening rush of wind joined occasionally by the howls of a confused dog.

The gentle pull of gravity picked a direction and Jim fell. Fast. A cloud whipped past, stinging his face with cold mist that cozied up with the root beer still lingering in his nose.

A borderless expanse of blue ocean far below raced to meet man and dog. An object bobbed on the desert of water. Jim only had time to ID it as “Hey, a guy in a lifebo—” before he slammed into the water, and blue faded to black.