

EVERYDAY PITY

He had been married eleven weeks and kept keenly aware of the Greater Good and the Bigger Picture. These were the linchpins of his 20-week *Life Plan 20/20 Workbook* he had followed near-verbatim since the fall. He had insisted on taking his marriage seriously, and this constituted the first in what he thought would become a legacy of Mature Postnuptial Decisions.

However, his deep-down predilections were that of a boy's and his curiosity for the more illicit side of temptation entertained lesser motivations.

On his eleventh week of marriage he decided to stow away his half-smoked pack of cigarettes under his box spring before driving to the hardware store.

There, in the parking lot, he subdued his lungs with the smoke and sediment of what he decided would be his last non-emergency cig. He had kicked around the idea of the last-cig sacrament for twenty or thirty seconds while tying his boots before he left.

He enjoyed the cigarette and, feeling satisfied with the ritual, threw the remains on a potted plant outside the store entrance. The butt landed on a hand-shaped leaf, where it snuffed out in a pool of melted hail.

Tapping the slush from his boots, he wove through the columns of clearance shelves and display pyramids that lined the storefront, only stopping to check the expiration date of the Value Brand *Small Dog: Complete Nutrition Dog Food* formula which came with a QR code linked to a printable coupon for a seven-kilo zipper bag of Value Brand *Discover the Difference: Oral Care Dog Food*.

Finding no posted expiration date, he carried on toward the back of the store where they sold foreign-made electronics in the kind of cheap plastic that always gave him blisters.

He realized he was still carrying the bag of dog food. He put it down on a shelf in between swimming pool chemicals.

At the rear of the store he found a cabinet wedged between two tables. They both held dozens of transparent gallon jugs with a generic white label that spelled out its viscous fillings and expiration.

The cabinet had streaky glass doors whose sheen was telling of the contents' newness. The doors were padlocked, and an emboldened sign above the handles pictured a smiling sales rep.

A visibly underaged shelf stocker came over and unlocked it after asking to see his ID. He helped him pick out a marked down Taiwanese device and a doubly more expensive bag of required ancillaries: e-juices, replacement coils, a sub-ohm tank, a regular tank intended for what was described to him as "throat hits," and two jugs of pure vegetable glycerin.

He went back for a shopping cart. He used the self-service checkout and left. A smoker was idling outside. The cherry burning dour between her middle and forefinger like a candlelight vigil.

The pavement was salted on Monday morning, but its smell lingered in the car. It lingered in the driveway. It lingered in the doorway.

Hauling his items into the house, he sat down on top the hood of his deep freezer. He kept it in the hallway because living space was tight, and it provided much-needed relief after his hangover trips to the grocery store.

Even without the hangover he found that the freezer made for a seat preferable to the leather furniture his roommate's parents had bought for them. He enjoyed listening to the hum of the freezer and how it would rattle against his hanging feet.

He thought about showing the vaporizer to his roommate, but he kept it tucked inside his inner vest pocket, its newly designated hiding spot.

The next day, his neighbours heard him coughing through the walls of his flat. They could also hear him with his wife. The odd time when she mounted him she would rock back and forth, lengthwise. It made the mattress slap against his bedroom wall, making a *thunk thunk thunk thunk*.

He thought about this for a moment: how his neighbors might tap the ceiling with a hockey stick and shout muffled slurs through the floorboards. It wouldn't be the first time they interrupted their breakfast to do this. The thought of them hunched over their dining room table with a bowl of cereal and scrolling through their e-reader amused him; how they would listen to the noises from above, roll their eyes, and then jut their chairs out from underneath the table before reaching for the broom. A few short seconds staging out this scenario in his head was all it took to lose half his dick. He bent her over and mustered what virility he could.

Now finished, they laid in a stupor, their breathing strained and in parallel. He wondered if she could smell the cigarettes hidden only inches under the mattress. She had her arm sprawled across his chest and was speaking with the confidence and placidity of someone who had just been woken up with sex.

She asked him about his weekend plans and he responded with inert predictions. There was something in the air that reminded him of the chlorine in the hardware store. An irritation began in his throat and worked up to his idle mouth.

There was no honeymoon. He worked privately on his craft in the days that followed. He was a Digital Wellness Consultant, providing Skype seminars to middle aged hopefuls.

He never had a clear answer as to why he chose the profession he did. He came up with the idea while drunk one afternoon. A lucrative decision, his finely-curated social media presence and background in programming served him well in establishing a foothold in the market during the early days of Instagram.

(He had dabbled in web design after teaching himself to program C++ and Python from an e-book he purchased in his senior year of high school. He gained local notoriety only a year after by twice breaking into the town rec centre's industrial control system, defrosting the ice rink both times, and managing on the second attempt to catastrophically flood the surrounding wooden bleachers.

In municipal court, the plaintiff's counsel alleged that the visiting team's door had been left open that night, which caused a spillover onto the team's bench area and, from there, throughout the audience seating. The stunt ended up costing the local junior hockey team six weeks without a home game, an affliction unthinkable in small-town Ontario. In all, the ordeal cost him four grand in legal fees, another five in damages, and a controversially lenient sentence of 150 hours of community service. A penalty which, in fact, was reasonably heavy-handed for a minor according to precedents established in the case law his defense attorney dug up.¹

During his subsequent court-ordered volunteering stint at the YMCA, he picked up on some new-age vocabulary while passing out cups of water at tai-chi classes.

¹ In each of the following cases the plaintiffs were successful in securing compensatory damages but were denied punitive damages under materially similar circumstances: *R. v. S.W.* [2011] ONSC 887; *R. v. Gloudon* [2007] CanLII 58410 (ON SC); *Czarnogorski v. Stradwick* [2004] CanLII 13495 (ON SCSM). The learned Justice of the Peace rejected this defense on account of several aggravating factors, and the premeditated quality of the crime. This was thought to qualify the case as being substantively "unique".

After completing his sentence, he combined his programming talents with his newly discovered vernacular by designing his own fitness app, Mighty Monk, with all the requisite buzzwords embedded directly in the source code

```
<!DOCTYPE html>
<html>
<head>
  <title>Mighty Monk: Your Personal Wellness
  Adviser</title>
  <meta name="spirulina info" content="Chakra Alignment
  Strategy"/>
  <link rel="crystals: amethyst and more"
  href="upgrade/premium-alignment-package.css/>
  <meta name="food guide: acai berries" content="Order
  Now"/>
  <meta name="Wanderlust" content="Virtual Yoga
  Studio"/>
  <style type="urban outfitters" media="all">
    @import "white suburbia.css", "steve jobs
  turtle neck.html";
  </style>
  <meta name="late stage breastfeeding" content="Pre-
  Workout Meditation Ritual"/>
  <meta name="nootropic facial" content="Are you looking
  to TONE? Or SHRED?"/>
</head>
```

which proved to be a gainful strategy as the app was seen on first-page search engine queries after its first week live. A month in, Mighty Monk briefly ranked tenth on the App Store's Health & Fitness section.

Having grossed over a thousand active users by graduation, he was able to ship himself to a quaint coastal university out of province with all expenses paid, but the threat of legal prosecution a year later forced him to discontinue the app under the mysterious pretenses of fraud and "tortious interference," which an investigative piece in the campus paper revealed to be part of a larger settlement for an undisclosed amount. Passively, he still collects an income from one-on-one "teleconsulting" with his most besot Mighty Monk devotees.)

His roommate knocked on the bedroom door. He apologized to his client and ended that week's consultation by excusing himself and closing the video chat.

Craig says he needs to speak with you.

Tell him I'll be right over.

Craig was their landlord. Craig respected him about as much as his tenants respected the occupation of being a landlord.

Not wanting Craig to notice the vaporizer, he pulled it from his vest pocket and left it on his bedside table.

Craig lived next door, where he was found sitting on his front steps with a cigarette in his mouth. The wooden steps groaned under their feet. They spoke for five or six minutes, with Craig civilly easing into the subjects of discussion, which, in sequence, consisted of

- i) his repeated early morning noise violations,
- ii) last month's truant rent payment, and
- iii) his impending eviction.

The injunction wasn't framed as an eviction per se, but more a demand to voluntarily terminate the lease agreement seven months early.

Seeing as expulsion from his home did not line up with the ascribed My Mission Formula in his *Life Plan 20/20 Workbook*—of which he was now entering the twenty-eighth week—he began to shout in objection. At that moment, he was overcome with the temptation of violence. He imagined his hands rung around the landlord's neck and squeezing tight, which caused something to tingle at the base of his head.

Craig cited a litany of ongoing problems with the tenancy: extended guests, unapproved subletting, improper use, and a series of unrelenting nuisance complaints from neighboring units. "Rogue tenants," as he called them, were a liability nightmare.

In his defense, he rambled on about his marriage, insisting that it was within his right to see his wife whether she was a guest or not.

Fearing the involvement of police, he paused to collect himself. He unfurled his fist. Another criminal charge was something he couldn't afford. He had worn a suit on only two occasions in his life and did not want the third to be in another courtroom.

He looked over at the filthy, beer-stained coffee table on the porch. Having walked up to it, he grabbed an unfinished smoke from the ash tray and lit it with the lighter sitting next to it. He sucked in a rotten cloud of smoke and blew it in his landlord's face.

What the fuck's gotten into you?

He put it on his tongue and swallowed.

That evening he sat alone and smoked his first three emergency cigarettes over four glasses of milk. The following morning, he sat on his mattress with his wife, recounting the previous day's events. There were nerves in his gut that no delivery of nicotine could settle.

Five days had passed since his wife had stood up and left him on the mattress, ending a marriage of thirteen weeks. He had since returned to contemplating the Bigger Picture, the Greater Good—resolute, recreated, fallen back on the only space of mind he had recourse to.

He swigged the mixed contents of a Coke bottle, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and looked himself square in the eyes, gazing through the milky streaks of his medicine cabinet door. He chucked the empty bottle in the trash and swirled a mouthful of Listerine.

He cracked his bathroom window for the first time in months. The last surviving smell of salt seeped in, followed by the scent of the thawing earth beneath. It had been a wet February, and, to his judgment, the depths of winter had come and gone. He made faces. He smiled many goofy, pop-eyed smiles. There was something in him that day that he could not close or quiet or shut away.

The refracting light of the evening broke through the window, and the sky was all there was to see; it was made of many bleeding red colours. He was full of many thoughts.

When he finally left the bathroom, pushing the door closed behind him, he knew what his future held. He sat on the freezer, laced his boots, and walked out onto the porch. Gritting his newly minted teeth, he fished a cigarette from his jeans pocket. He put it in his mouth, readied it, then lit the fuse.