

Cured

"I'm done trying Tony," Abby says. Her hair blows in the wind as we walk in the park beside her apartment. It will be someone else running their fingers through her hair now, I guess. This hurts more than it should, given how many times this has happened before.

"So, no movie then?" I say, "That's too bad, it got really good reviews."

She sighs and turns back to walk home, so I guess that means I win, since I'm the player who left the table with the smallest amount of emotion. And what better way to celebrate victory then with a bag of candy from the corner store on the way home? What better throne for the king of autonomy than his couch in front of his TV?

#

"Those are those 'Comfort Candies' aren't they?" my room-mate Jad says, returning from his evening work-out. He throws himself on the couch beside me. "In the year we've lived together, I've never seen you smiling while eating those jujubes."

It's one in the morning, but Jad's still in the mood to talk. He has a poly-phasic sleep cycle which means he sleeps something like four hours a day in half hour chunks.

His foot taps out the same rhythm that I usually hear when he's in front of a whiteboard solving a problem. He reaches into his pocket and takes out a stress ball, branded with the logo of some start-up I've never heard of. He rolls it between his hands with the same ceremony as a therapist asking you to lay down on the couch.

"Given the glutinous evidence presented before me," he says, "I'm going to hypothesize that Abby broke up with you. Mind if I enquire about the cause of termination?"

"She said we drifted apart over the summer," I say, "because we were so far away."

Now, she says she's done trying to connect. What does that even mean?"

"Why didn't you ask her?" he asks.

"I prefer clean and quick break-ups."

"Do you actually want my honest opinion?"

I grab another handful of jujubes in preparation. "Hit me."

"You don't connect emotionally with other people and I doubt you even know how to connect with yourself."

"I connect with myself the same way everyone else does. One hand on the mouse, the other hand on my..."

"First point. You don't seem to be able to imagine anyone complexly."

"What? I understand people."

"When I introduced you to my friend Jun, you said he smelled pretty good for a hippy."

"It was a joke. And he's totally a hippy, you talked about unifying energies that link humanity."

"He's a priest. He was talking about parishioner's idea of God and how it's diverging-"

"And my interest level is crashing..."

"Second point. What is it you are actually working towards? I've only heard you mention things you hate, never anything you've loved."

"Hold up. Why do I need to 'work towards something'? And even if you're right about these 'problems', what can I do about them anyway?"

"Depends. Ideally, what would you want achieve?"

"Closure?"

"I think our old friend the scientific method could help here."

"I think we need new friends."

"Assuming you agree with the premise of my analysis, we should check it's validity."

That way, you'll find out if you really are 'unconnectable'."

"You can't measure connectedness."

"You can't quantify it exactly, but what if you tried being a more caring person? You know, fake it until you make it and analyse the results."

"How do I even fake that?"

"You could try cognitive behaviour therapy."

"That sounds like something out of a self-help book."

"Or there might be something we can print."

I like that idea a lot better.

Jad is the only owner of a bio-printer in our city and probably for hundreds of miles around. From what I understand, there are a lot of fancy compounds in the world made out of basic materials that are easily acquirable. If you get that material, you can print it into whatever you want. The LSD he printed out for us last week is just carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen. How you get from code to the pills, I'm not so clear on, but as long as the LSD keeps working, I'm not too worried.

Jad taps on his phone a few times and I hear the bio-printer start in his bedroom. I smell the usual synthetic aroma coming from the printer, except this time with a unique hint of strawberry.

"Some researchers in Austria found this compound that enhances the amount of empathy you feel," Jad says, "which is basically what you're lacking."

"What's the catch? Spontaneous tentacle production?" I say.

With another tap on his device, he sends me the research papers.

"Check it out for yourself", he says.

They seem legitimate as far as my high school knowledge of biology is concerned.

"Okay," I say, "but I'm stopping as soon as things get too weird."

"Of course", he says, smiling reassuringly.

#

It first sneaks up on me a couple of days later while I'm sitting in Ecology class. We're talking about these tropical frogs that went extinct and a ball of emotion starts to build in my chest. I feel the all-encompassing despair that would come with being of the last of your species, unable to understand why everything you've ever known is coming to an end. To know without a doubt that there is no future left. The prof says that this tragedy is due in part to our carnivorous diet, which encourages the deforestation of the Amazon.

Despite my heart swelling with righteous indignation, the best affirmative action I can come up with is choosing a veggie burger for lunch.

#

I notice it again when I get a coffee on my way home. The cashier is sluggish, but for once I'm able to see through my initial annoyance and tell she's having a rough day. I decide to try to cheer her up.

I blurt out once I reach the front of the line, "Your earrings are really nice... And you are doing a good job."

"Thanks?" she says.

I'm not sure about what to do next, so I grab my coffee and speed walk out the door.

I practically skip on my way to my next class and for a moment I forget Abby... But only for a moment. I don't think it's possible to make a pill that untangles the mess of a breakup.

#

I tell all of this to Jad while we eat dinner, "It's like I've discovered this sixth sense that I didn't know I had. I can feel what other people are feeling. And I care. Like deeply care in a way I didn't know I was missing."

"Just be careful you don't get exploited," he says while drinking his meal replacement shake.

#

That night, I don't crave the lol-cats and videos of epic fails as much as I usually do. Instead, I start Googling all these things that I kept being told I should care about, but could never muster the motivation to investigate. Along the way, I find out that my vegetarian meal didn't help the frogs much and that the problem is way more complicated. Normally, pre-medication me would accept the world is doomed at this point, but now I want to know the truth, no matter how much I have to dig.

#

My first over-reaction happens while I'm eating lunch with my friend in the cafeteria on campus. In the movie we're watching, a group of people trapped on a subway car are hurtling towards the end of the track. Just when you think they're about to become human pancakes, the fail-safe on the track catches them and they're all saved. Tears of relief start streaming down my face.

"Are you okay?" my friend asks cautiously. I try to look for an escape route, but come up blank.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I croak, trying to wipe the tears from my face.

"Is it the breakup? Do you want to..." he pauses before entering unfamiliar territory, "talk about it?" He asks, questioning the very concept of his proposal.

I cycle through the plausible options desperately, "Yes. No. Maybe? I... I have to go." I rush out of the cafeteria, looking for a bathroom where I can regain my composure.

#

The next day on my way home, I cross paths with a student trying to get donations for a charity.

"Hey, do you have a minute?" she asks, earnestly concerned that I might be too busy.

"Sure." I don't, but I can't bring myself to walk past her.

She's not very convincing, but all it takes is one photo of a starving child to vacuum out my wallet. I have to sell my iPod so I can eat for the next month, seeing as I'm too embarrassed to ask my parents for money.

That night, I can't sleep. My mind keeps conjuring up the girl. In particular, her excitement and eagerness as she tried to convince me to be involved in something that she cares so much about. What do I want? What do I care about? My nihilistic counter-arguments, usually so strong and impenetrable, now seem flat and unimaginative.

#

The next morning, Jad knocks on my door to give me the pills for the next week, I flip

him off without turning away from my textbook.

"Fuck caring. I want my old life back."

Jad is taken aback, "What? We just got started."

"This shit..." I turn around like a James Bond villain, but clutching my depression jujubes instead of petting a cat, "has gotten too ridiculous. I'm crying at movie endings that aren't even sad."

"We'll lower the dose some more."

"When people ask me for charity donations, my wallet becomes a liability."

"I'm sure a lower dose will fix those problems."

"No, fuck it Jad, I need my apathy to function. I used to be happy. Now, I'm having existential crises at night, which is something I thought only emo kids did."

"So your priorities are re-aligning. Isn't this what you wanted?"

My voice approaches hysteria. "Maybe, but I still wanted to know who the hell I was. I DON'T EVEN LIKE THESE FUCKING JUJUBES ANYMORE!" I shake the bag in front of me accenting my frustration. Jad pleads, "Come on don't give up now!"

Although Jad does give me suggestions from time to time, ultimately he has always let me choose the path of my life. He would work like crazy on his projects and I would mess around on the Internet. The only reason he would be trying to shove these pills down my throat is...

"Hey," I say, "I know! Let's see if the people who wrote the papers did any other work on the potential sociological effects of the drug."

Jad starts to explain, but I ignore him, turning back to my computer. I grab the name of the first researcher from the paper and plug into Google.

Just as I thought, zero relevant results. Jad sighs behind me.

"You son of a bitch!" I get up off my chair and throw the jujubes to the ground,

"You've been waiting all along for me to be vulnerable and now you're killing me for one of your fucking experiments!"

"I would hardly call increased motivation and emotional awareness fatal..."

"You don't know what the long term effects are!"

"Please, you make it sound like I didn't try it on myself first."

That stops me in my tracks.

"Why are you taking these things?" I ask as my fist unclenches.

"I needed to test the fix before I spread it to a wider audience."

"What? Are you planning to sneak it into the water supply like some super-villain?"

"Actually, I was thinking the campus coffee machine might be the more practical vector of propagation."

"I'm not even going to try and counter that. Jad, the pills have made you completely insane and I am moving the hell out."

To his credit, Jad doesn't try to stop me as I rush through out of our apartment and slam the door.

#

Post-empathy is a weird state of being. I used to care about all these things, but now I can close my bubble and focus on myself. I can't decide if this is an improvement.

One day while taking my meandering route back to my friend's house, I see Jad's friend Jun handing out leaflets. Instead of avoiding him and his philosophical ramblings like the plague as I usually do, I march towards him with an angry sense of purpose.

He extends a black and white print-out towards me. "Hey Tony, long time no see. How's Jad?"

"Alive." I say, grabbing a pamphlet from his hand.

"Do you want help the homeless acquire internet skills?"

I look from the pamphlet and directly into his eyes. "Like most people today, I'm going to lie to you and say yes, but never follow up on anything. Do you know why?"

He's unfazed by my emotional instability. "Because you're intimidated by responsibility?"

"Nope. Because I can't imagine the effort being worth the cost of leaving my cosy home."

He holds up his pamphlet defensively. "Listen, I didn't mean to anger..."

"Sorry. I'm not angry, you just seem to have some answers I need and I've lost the only friend that I can talk about this with."

"Okay..."

"Apathy stops me from helping people, so ideally, I should fix it."

"Sure."

"What if, hypothetically, you could take a pill that made you more emotionally sensitive to other people's suffering. Would you take it?"

He takes the philosophical bait and lowers his arms. "Of course. Assuming that it has no ulterior cost."

"But it's hard being empathetic. It tires you and it makes it easier for people to take advantage of you."

"Assuming that you can avoid exploitation with thoughtfulness, it sounds like a move in the right direction to me."

"But it stops you from being happy. It's not natural."

"What's your natural state like?"

"Hypothetically?"

"Hypothetically."

"It sucks. I know that I should care, but I can never make the first step. I keep drifting. Maybe I'm bad at being a human being."

"Being a good human being isn't a default state. It's something you and I will always be learning. If your definitions of right and wrong didn't change since you were five, you would be seen as a menace to society."

"So you're saying that nature isn't ideal?"

"Not always. But you just have to keep in mind moderation. I'm assuming you only have a hypothetical pill and not a hypothetical brain control device too."

"Just the pill. But even if it isn't addictive, a pill is still a dependency. Shouldn't my solution come from within myself?"

"Well, what is the self? Actually, let's not go there. Why do you think the solution has to come from yourself?"

"Because it's more admirable?"

"Doesn't having to care offer enough admirable struggles?"

"But if you take the pill, you give up part of the control you have over your life."

"The way I see it, control is when you're still able to define and choose your own choices. This passes that test. You create the choice of caring and you enable it when you take the pill."

"The hypothetical pill."

"Yes. The oddly detailed hypothetical pill."

I thank him and walk away exposed, but relieved of some rock that's been sitting in my gut.

#

I'm taking a short-cut back home when I hear someone crying in one of the computer labs. My body freezes in resistance, but I fight through it and go talk to her. She's bent over her keyboard, her arms hiding her face.

"Hey," I say, "do you need someone to talk to?"

She looks up. It's Abby. She got a haircut and I didn't recognize her.

"Are you kidding me?" she says.

Since there's no dignity to salvage at this point, I might as well be honest. "

"Would you believe me if I told you 'no'?"

"Yeah," she says, "I need someone to talk to, but honestly, you're the last person I want to explain my problems to. Even when we were together you weren't that great at the serious stuff."

"Humour me. I'm trying to turn over a new leaf and your only other option at this point is the guy playing Starcraft behind you."

She lets out a weak laugh and then lets her shoulders slump, "My grandmother is in the hospital. She only has to get some surgery and there's a two percent chance that she'll die, but I keep thinking about how that's almost the same chance as picking card from a deck. I'm not ready to lose her, even though we've never been that close. Now I'm wondering maybe the fact that we aren't that close is mostly my fault. Honestly, I probably just need to get out of this lab and go for a walk."

She wipes her tears with the sleeve of her sweater. "God, who cries in public when they're this old?"

"Well, recently me..."

"Seriously?" She's smiling now. Would pre-drug me miss a smile?

"What the hell happened?" she says.

My muscles tighten in my chest initially, but this is what empathetic people do, they share.

"After you broke up with me, I wondered if what you said had some truth in it, so Jad proposed a little experiment..."

By the time I'm finished, she looks like she's trying to decide between punching me and hugging me. She wisely opts for neither.

"Can you get me a supply of the pill from Jad?"

"What?"

"Right, you're pretty pissed at Jad right now. I guess I can talk to him myself."

"The fuck? Why do you want to take the pill?"

"Most of the reason I can't talk with my grandmother is that we come from such different places, I don't even know where to start. She keeps gossiping about her neighbours, when all I really want to hear about is what she thinks about life and everything, you know, since she's lived this long. I think the pill would help."

"But it sucks being on the pill. It makes you unhappy."

"That's because you don't know how to handle it. What have you tried to remedy your misery Mr. New Leaf, other than Googling and vegetarian meals?"

"Uh, I was thinking of volunteering?"

"Where?"

"Africa?"

"Have you thought of starting to care for the people around you before you try to care for the world?"

My muscles tighten up again, but I know how to push through them this time.

"Right," I say, "I've gotta go talk to Jad."

Abby calls out after me, as I get up to leave, "Are you using Jad as your 'rebound'? I

mean, you share more with him than you ever did with me."

I flip her off over my shoulder and her laughter follows me down the hall.

#

I open the door to our apartment just as Jad is about to leave.

"Listen," I say, "about the pills. I've been thinking..." That's when the smell of strawberries hits me.

"Wait. Jad," I say, "what's in your backpack?"

"Computer," he says, "snacks, the usual."

"I can smell something printed."

"Some LSD for my friends later."

"Bullshit. The LSD smells different. You printed out more of the pill."

"This doesn't involve you. Don't worry about it."

"Are you going to try and sneak into the coffee?"

"Why do you care? You don't drink the cafeteria coffee."

"Give me the bag Jad."

I make a grab for it, but Jad punches me in the face. I fall on the ground cringing and expecting more blows, but instead I hear sobs coming from Jad.

"Three mother fucking years." He says. "Three fucking years and nothing's changed."

"Changed?"

"Do you know why I started trying to 'fix' everyone?"

"Because you're crazy?"

"Close. Because I needed the fix more than anyone else."

"What?"

#

It happened back when I was in San Francisco. I'm sitting in this bar, waiting for a friend to show up. There's this girl who is giving me glances, so I walk over. We hit it off and just as I'm starting to think of asking her for her number, her boyfriend shows up. Hip looking guy, kind of scrawny. He doesn't even tell me off right away. He joins the conversation, hinting for me to leave, but I don't because I want to show to his girlfriend how much more interesting I am than the average person.

Finally, he says it out loud, 'Hey. Back off. She's taken.'

So I leave them with, 'You know you could do better.'

That pisses him off, which is what I wanted. He shoves me from behind and even if it's the tiniest of physical triggers, it ignites the powder keg that I've been building up all night.

I swing back at him, trying to make it seem like I'm an amateur. He dodges it and I roll with his next punch to give him a false sense of confidence. The bouncer moves in as I predicted and we take it outside. The girlfriend leaves at this point, disgusted with both of us, but I don't care since I have a new goal. I want to show him that I'm not someone to mess with. I beat the crap out of him, but I don't stop when it's clear I won. No surprise there really, considering I didn't stop to think at all that night. I kept pushing for the 'win'. The proof that I was better than everyone else in that room.

#

Jad pauses as tears start to run down his face with renewed vigour.

"When adrenaline wears off and I see how much damage I've done, I run. I hear sirens, so I guess someone called an ambulance. I like to think he recovered, because I was never charged, but I'm not sure. Maybe no one knew who I was.

It scared the hell out of me. I had been in a lot of fights before, mostly when I was younger, but it never went this far. To know what I was capable of and to know that it would always lay dormant in me was disturbing. The only viable solution from that point on was for me to change who I was. So I made the pill and now it's been three years I've been taking it."

"That seems drastic", I say.

"Can you think of any other way Tony?" Jad says, "Violence comes down to the fact that you can't imagine the other person as a human being. They are an opponent, they are to be defeated and you are to be the victor. That made sense when we were cavemen, but not anymore. The solution to the problem is simple. Make empathy easier. Make it the default choice."

He lets his head fall in his hands.

"Maybe it doesn't work. Maybe human nature is immutable."

I start to laugh.

"What?" Jad says.

"I hate you," I say, "but it worked for me. I'm changed and I know that if I want to make it last I'll have to work at it. That's why I don't want you to put it in the coffee. I mean, yeah, it's stupid, illegal and crazy, but it also won't change people in the way you want. The pill doesn't give you super-powers, it makes you weak. If you don't let people choose, then they won't change."

"You call taking a vegetarian meal significant progress?"

"Of course not. That's sympathy, but you have to start somewhere."

I put my hand on my jaw and it explodes in pain.

"Speaking of turning empathy into action," I say, "can you drive me to the walk-in clinic? I think you broke my jaw."

"No," Jad says, "it's just bruised. I would know if I broke it. I'll get you some ice."

"You don't have some magic un-bruising pill?"

"I do, but it makes your balls fall off."

"Oh god, how did they find -"

"I was joking. I'll get you some acetaminophen."

I let a crooked smile spread across my face as I lean my head against the wall. The warmth of a rekindled friendship spreads throughout my chest and contrasts nicely with the ice I apply on my chin.

"So if I have to let people choose," Jad says, "what's next then?"

"I don't know," I say, "but I'd like to talk about it."

The uncertain blank slate provided by the future stretches out in front of me and for the first time, I'm actually excited to see it.