

Mad Happy

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[Image Credit: *linogravure* by Sophie Lecuyer]

I wasn't eating when I met Seth. I worked part-time as an art teacher at a high school in Miami. The kids hated me. They were very cool and wore high-wasited jeans and platform shoes. I couldn't tell the girls from the boys sometimes. They had names like Frankie and Jael and Cypress and Salem. Their hair changed colors every week. They cursed a lot even though we were in the classroom and I was their superior. I brought a hard-boiled egg with me to work every day and ate it before school started. That was my allotted food for the day. Other than that, I starved. I arrived at 7:15am and the kids shuffled in around 7:45am. I liked being in the room alone. I'd get there before my room leader and had to ask the Computer Science teacher to let me in. He was really old but everyone loved him. He had seniority in a way I never would anywhere I went for the rest of my life. He's the kind of person you'd hope to have as a mentor. But instead of talking to him, I rolled my egg against a student's empty desk and peeled the shell from its body.

School was about an hour drive. I didn't mind waking up early and having somewhere to go. My life had no meaning, no purpose. I wanted the kids to like me but they always talked about their art teacher from previous years, Mrs. Kearning, who was from Australia and had an accent and wore colorful dresses and beautiful coats. I couldn't imagine wearing a coat in the Florida sun. I wished they'd be a little more grateful for me in my linen pantsuits, driving all that way just for them.

One boyish girl, Daphne, who had hair the color of ketchup, asked me where I got my art degree. The nerve some people have. I had the kids walk around campus and find pieces of garbage to make art with. "Anyone can draw on a piece of paper," I'd say. "Anyone can go buy a block of clay." They'd come back to the room with cinderblocks and cigarette butts, cans of Sprite.

"Perfect," I'd say and watch them hot glue one thing to another. They looked upset while they worked. I tried to keep smiling. I imagined a mother bird waiting for her babies to find food on their own for the first time.

My favorite place in the whole world is probably the movies. It's like getting to travel time with your mind, enter another consciousness or see the world from a different point of view. My boyfriend Seth liked going to the movies. It's a great place to knock out and nobody will care. I didn't mind that he was missing it. I didn't mind waking him up at the end and carrying him to the car, driving home and making sure he got where he needed to be. It felt very good to care for someone that way. It wasn't his fault. It's never their fault. My brother was addicted to heroin and he had made it very clear that the world around him was to blame.

Seth liked for me to tell him the plot later, as if my retelling would insight a memory, a flash, a spark of the real thing, like he had watched it himself. He'd floss his teeth in the bathroom, the floss pick raised out in front of him like a gavel. I'd wait for him to nod or make a noise so I could keep going. I put the lid on the toilet seat down and sat there watching him, his shaved head, his big lips, his mouth open and whispering, *Make sure I'm up tomorrow...I work at noon...gotta make...that...money.*

I had dreams of moving to California and seeing a Redwood tree someday, up close and personal. Seth told me it was a stupid dream. He said Florida was the greatest place in the world and no one should ever want to leave. But he lived in an apartment his step-dad paid for that was only twenty minutes from the beach. On Sundays, some of the guys took chairs and coolers filled with Redbull and cranberry juice out to the beach and sat in a circle and talked about Jesus.

"If Jesus was around, wouldn't you want to go see him?" I'd ask Seth. "Wouldn't you make a trip out to praise the one you love?"

"Nah," Seth said. "Jesus is in your heart. And you don't need no journey for that shit."

I researched the Redwoods at night when Seth was done for and I was still wide-awake, like a kid. I'd take his laptop downstairs and look into art programs in Northern California. Retreats, they were called, and I thought of my brother playing with his Nerf guns when we were little, the way he'd yell "RETREAT!" when he got shot with a foam dart, the little plunger on the end. When I thought about that time in my life, my mind opened up like a door revealing a cavernous room. Just as a light was beginning to shine down on some things, the door would shut again and stay locked until another word tugged at the handle.

My brother had once flown to California to buy marijuana that he sold to kids at our high school. He flew alone and used his Bar Mitzvah money to buy the plane ticket. He rolled it up in plastic bags and stuffed it in shampoo bottles in his checked luggage. He got away with it but never did it again.

He became really popular for a few weeks, kids coming over all the time to pick up and tell him how great he was. But when he ran out of stuff things went back to normal and he started playing video games alone in his room again. "Never become a drug dealer," my brother had said. He always talked about moving to California and becoming a grower, but ended up working at Best Buy and living with my parents.

I didn't smoke or do any drugs. I didn't want to go to California for any of those reasons. I knew there was more to life I wasn't seeing in Florida. I had never seen a tree that wasn't a palm tree. I had never walked through a forest where the sky disappeared, trees so tall and big they'd cover me, they'd cover everything.

There was a meeting Seth used to go to off Sunrise Boulevard. It was at a church near the train tracks. I once saw a pregnant girl younger than me smoking a cigarette on its steps. I went with him not only to keep him company but to learn something for myself. I think I got more out of it than him. Oddly enough, it was the only time he could stay awake. He had so many friends and would hug and high-five everyone there. He always wore his nice watch and shoes and told me to dress up a little. I had to buy new outfits just for the meetings. I couldn't show up in my school clothes or everyone would think I was a square. Girls smiled at Seth and would talk to him after the meetings when everyone hung around, especially if he had shared that night. Girls with names like Lisa and Dayna and Charlie and Greer. I hated them but I had to pretend I loved them. I had to kiss their cheeks and let them take a stick of gum if they asked.

I loved Seth because he was so lovable. He was deserving of love, this guy who didn't have his head screwed on right, as my mom would say. His house was closer to school and I stayed over there a lot. He worked at a restaurant and was always sleeping when I left for work early in the morning. His shifts didn't start until nighttime and he had the whole day to sleep or get high or talk on the phone to his friends who had left Florida and moved back home to Boston, to Mississippi, to New Jersey. I stopped asking to spend the night and started showing up whenever I wanted. I'd bring Pollo Tropical for Seth to eat when he would wake up from his sleeps. I'd drink an extra large Diet Coke and that would be enough to get me through an afternoon, a night. The thought of food repulsed me. But I liked getting Seth his meals. He loved Chipotle, McDonalds, anything that came to his house in a bag or a box, something easy, quick. Something you could fold up and throw away after, wipe the table off with one clean sweep and be done with it. He hated the food at his restaurant, a Cuban place that served fried beefsteaks and plantains and rice and beans and sweet bread. He much preferred the ease and comfort of fast food, the serenity that came in the form of a drive-through window.

Luna, the maid, came once a week. She was the nicest person I've ever met. She always brought over little Mexican candies and redid the curtains without anyone asking. She set up a candle with the image of Jesus on the mantle and lit it while she cleaned. Luna didn't mind that Seth was high all the time.

He sometimes yelled at her if she moved his stash or cleaned a pipe that was supposed to stay dirty with residue. She'd shrug her shoulders at Seth and put the duster in his face to tease him. When he walked away, she'd wink at me and laugh. We both thought, *Our boy, what a nutcase, what a hound.* She showed me a picture of her daughter that she had in a locket worn around her neck. "Su nombre es Jenny," she said and shed a tear. I always wondered where her daughter was, if she was very far away. I liked to imagine she was lost at sea.

Seth gave me an Adderall once and I ended up at Walmart for three hours. The Halloween Costumes fascinated me. They were cheap, but important. You had to pick between the least offensive thing and be it, live it, dress-up and die right. Adderall was also great for not eating. After I purchased about three hundred dollars (a week's worth of pay from the school) of cheap makeup and decorative pillows, I sat in the car in the parking lot and thought about my students for some reason. I wondered if the kids were curious about my personal life, what they'd think of me if they knew all my troubles, my trials and failures, my lack of self-care. Everyone seemed to be big on that then, self-care. Kids were excusing themselves from school to have "mental health days." I'd never heard anything like it before. I cried in my car often, but I didn't think I needed any further assistance. My dad always told me to "buck up" and I guess that stuck with me. If a kid felt "triggered" by one of my assignments, they weren't forced to participate. The school even wanted to eliminate public speaking. "But it's a performance school," I'd said to my room leader. She simply shook her head and sighed. The world was changing and there was nothing we could do about it.

Life is a series of unfortunate events, I thought. Seth was working late again, so I drove to Friendly's and ate an entire banana split by myself. It was the first time I'd eaten a whole meal in weeks. It felt good to consume something, to be a consumer. I felt like I was contributing to society. I was helping the economy. I was making my country a better place. I was practicing self-care.

I had to pull over on the way home to throw up. Some things aren't meant to last.

I came over one day after work and Seth was gone. I thought maybe he'd gone to a meeting before his shift started, but his phone was on his bedside table, dead and useless. I fell asleep watching a documentary about Biomass energy in California and woke up to a knock on the door at 7:00am the next day. Two older gentlemen were there to pack some of Seth's things for him. They told me I had to leave, that Seth was in detox, things were bad. I asked if I could visit and they said he'd call me when that was possible. I grabbed my toothbrush from the bathroom and drove to my parents' house in Boynton Beach, an hour north.

On the drive I fell into a sort of trance. I imagined what would happen when

Seth emerged from treatment. I'd been through this so many times before, and I wondered if I could *truly* do it again. I thought about my brother, the way he became a different person when he tried to get clean. The treatment centers with their chain-smoking inhabitants and overly positive therapists, the way each time my brother made any kind of progress, he still feared the future, the rest of his life. He wanted to know exactly what would happen when he walked out of the doors and into reality. Every time we thought he had been sober for a while, it'd turn out he'd been using the whole time, fooling us all. Seth had met my brother once for an awkward family dinner. We had met at an Italian restaurant in Boca Raton. My mom asked Seth if he would go back to school someday to get his Bachelor's degree so he could get a real job.

"Nah," Seth said. "I'm mad happy at the restaurant. It's easy money and I don't take that stress home with me. I get to walk out every night with a wad of cash in my pocket and no problems in my head."

My brother sat still in his Best Buy uniform. I could see his eyes struggling to stay open, and I knew, it was so obvious, that he was more than just tired.

I stopped at a park where Seth took me on our first date. It was a wildlife preservation center that had a walking path with bridges and overlooks. I saw a bunch of old couples and class field trips as I traipsed along the nature walk alone. Life is a lonely venture, I thought.

A few kids were huddled at the end of dock and I went over to see what they were carrying on about. An alligator, about twelve-feet long, was gnawing on a rabbit just a couple yards away. The kids, all in royal blue uniform polo shirts and khaki shorts, were pointing and laughing, but one girl stood in the back crying. "Eat or be eaten, Dolly, that's the way of the world," their teacher said. The teacher was a tall and slim woman with jet-black hair and a pearl necklace. She wore a safari outfit and it felt dramatic. I was in sweatpants and a t-shirt, foregoing my linens for a comfy, house look. I couldn't help but compare myself to her, this full-time instructor who gets to go on field trips and show her students the world. In another life, I could have been her, and she could have been me. We could have each other's problems and know what it meant for the other to suffer. "Suffering is a part of life," someone said at a meeting once. "May you give yourself the compassion you need to get through this moment. May you learn to accept yourself as you are."

As I walked to my car, my phone rang and it was Luna. I imagined her standing outside the door of Seth's apartment, ringing the doorbell and waiting. But no one was home. I didn't even know she had my number. She was frantic and speaking in Spanish and I couldn't understand anything she said.

"Seth is sick," I said, which was true and the first time I had said it like that, in that way.

"Que?" she said.

"You can go home. Seth is away. He's sick, very, very sick. Go home, Luna."

"No entiendo!" she said, her voice cracking and sad, scared.

"Please, Luna, go home!" I yelled back at her and saw that I was causing a scene, mothers staring at me, holding their children close like I was going to take them away. I hung up the phone and got back in the car.

I stopped at McDonalds and ordered a double quarter pounder with cheese and a large Diet Coke. The girl who handed me the bag of food was younger than me, much younger. She looked so young it startled me, and I was confused about how to hand over the money. I fumbled with a twenty-dollar bill and it fell out of the window and onto the concrete. I got out of the car and the money started to blow away, so I chased after it. I ran around for a while and started crying. I was going to miss Seth, and I was scared for him. I was scared for everyone on earth who had problems they couldn't handle. "God only gives you what you could handle," I remembered Seth saying once. But maybe that wasn't true. Maybe the weak just won't survive this world. Maybe we aren't meant to all get along.

I stomped on the bill and picked it up, walked back to my car and handed the girl the money. She looked at me and I thought she might cry too.

"It's okay," she said and took the bill from my hand. "It happens all the time."



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