

The Pills Aren't Working

By Matthew Franklin

I opened my eyes. The air was heavy with the familiar scent of paper and ink. I found myself at my desk before a vintage Smith-Corona, my father's old typewriter. I was at my family's lake house – two stories of chestnut and pine masking its sorrow beneath cheap drapery and kitschy thrift store furniture. Cramped but cozy, the room was plastered wall-to-wall with faded floral wallpaper. I was alone, joined only by the company of long shadows and the ghostly glow of the moon.

I lingered on a small, framed photo on the writing desk next to the typewriter. An attractive couple with their son and daughter, each clad in orange life jackets, were frozen forever in a facade of happiness. Old memories flashed through my mind, recalling the clumsy little boy I once was. I saw glimpses of blinding rescue lights and tree branches draped in police tape. I remembered the local news stories:

"One killed in fatal accident," the sum of a life in five words.

Pulling my glasses away, I rubbed my eyes to force out the painful images. The memories and the nightmares they brought made sleep impossible. Fortunately, I had come to embrace my many restless nights. I adapted, finding sleep whenever it came. This often meant working through the night until fatigue overcame me. Other times, my body simply walked itself to bed.

I scoffed aloud as I stared at the blank page on the typewriter. I've lost track of the restless nights and empty hours. Somehow, I've become the stereotype of the reclusive novelist. My first novel became a surprise hit. Now I'm even trending on social media: Arthur Cunningham, the talentless hack profiting from the death of his own sister. I've been stringing along my publishers for weeks. I promised them a bestseller. More importantly, I promised my sister she wouldn't be forgotten.

My eyes fell on the collection of pills scattered across the desk. The menacing bottle's warning label stared back at me with grave text in thick, bold lettering:

HYPNOTIC SEDATIVE. TAKE ONE AS NEEDED. OVERDOSE CAN BE FATAL.

The list of side effects was certainly intimidating: fatigue, dizziness, memory impairment, and hallucinations; I gave up on reading them all. I briefly thought about leaving the pills and skipping my doses until my work was finished. Instead, I tossed a stray one back, swallowing it dry. It was like tasting a shard of metal, sharp and painful as it scraped my throat. As I waited for the drugs to lull me to sleep, I again let myself drift into nostalgia. Upon the invitation of the moon's ethereal glow, I warily approached the window. Peering down from the curtains, I saw it there, that placid lake hidden by blankets of still fog.

From my perch at the window, I could make out the faint sound of music playing beneath the fog. The mesmerizing melody was detuned as if being played from a bent record. It repeated, growing louder in my ears. Then, I heard a loud splash and screams. My chest tightened as guilt and panic overwhelmed me. When the fog finally cleared, the music had ceased. The water was utterly still.

Tearing myself from the window, I rushed to the bathroom, running warm water over my face. The strain on my mind revealed itself clearly in my reflection: my eyes were bloodshot and twitching. My hair was twisted in a mess of disheveled curls. My beard had become wild and overgrown. A stranger would recognize me as a madman, and I would be remiss to correct them. As I made a meager effort to adjust my sloppy appearance, a barrage of furious buzzing from my hip interrupted my thoughts. After fumbling for my smartphone, I found a notification flashing through its cracked screen – 1 new message.

i'm watching you

The sender read only as (Unrecognized). I hesitated before swiping the message away. Someone must have the wrong number. I moved to return my phone to my pocket when I received another buzz.

stay away

I quickly tapped out a reply, "Who is this?"

There was a long pause.

"How did you get this number?"

Another pause. My whole body tensed as dots trailed across the messaging app.

you know who I am

I felt a strange sinking sensation as if unseen eyes were watching me. I heard faint, ragged breathing from behind the door. The floorboards painfully creaked as if bending under some unseen weight. I silently approached the door, reaching to twist its knob open. When the door clicked open, whoever was behind it scampered away. The wet patter of its steps tumbled down the stairs. After a moment, I felt alone again. I scanned the unlit hallway, finding only stillness and darkness.

I rushed to the office and began scrolling through the messages on my phone. The strange texts were gone, replaced by a string of errors: "Message not received. Invalid number."

My hands were shaking. Someone followed me here, and I've taken sleeping pills. I started scrolling through my contacts, hoping to find someone to call. Only one other person even knew I came here, and she was on the other side of the state. My only option was the police. As I went to dial 911, the images on my screen melted away. My phone battery had died. Frustrated, I tossed my phone aside. I slumped to the floor with my back against the door, waiting and listening for signs of the lake house

intruder. Sometimes, I could make out a faint scraping sound against the walls. Other times, I heard creaking in the floorboards. Eventually, as time passed, my mind grew sluggish, then my eyes fell shut.

I awoke confused and shivering, with a queasy feeling in my gut. I was outside, lying face-up on the beach by the lake. The black clouds poured down rain incessantly. I rose slowly, flicking off mud caked on my neck and shoulders. My mouth was spoiled with the taste of electric metal. In my hand were tiny oblong pills clinging to my palm. I felt my stomach lurch; then I vomited in the mud.

Frozen in place before the menacing lake, I trembled as I imagined gnarled branches reaching toward me like crooked fingers. An overturned kayak glided towards me from the water. The water hissed as it violently bubbled in a rolling boil. I looked down at my distorted reflection as the water's steam stung my face. Then another face, pale and decrepit, rose from the dark waters - a girl with hair twisted like seaweed and black, sunken eyes. My heart sank. I recognized her.

Suddenly, like stone against steel, a sharp whisper ground in my mind, "...Brother..."

Two hands shot up beneath the water's surface, caked in dirt and grime. Engorged blue veins pulsed beneath their mottled, sagging skin. I cried as jagged claws burrowed into my leg. The hands gripped my ankles, slamming me down to the muddy beach and pulling me into the water. My head slammed against a rock, causing my vision to turn red. Sputtering on water, I tried in vain to plead for mercy. Then, I disappeared beneath the lake's surface.

In an instant, my world was ending. Water invaded my lungs, and my skin screamed against the boiling water. My untrained arms thrashed desperately in vain to pull me above the surface, but I couldn't escape. Choking black Death encroached, threatening to snuff out my very existence. As I was forced to the lake's bottom, the edges of my sight fell away into the darkness.

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Somehow, the darkness lifted. My mind was dizzy with confusion. I'm still alive. I felt rough wood scratching against my back. I touched my head, but there was no pain, no blood. I found myself lying across a wooden bench in front of the lake. I noticed the cylinder-shaped bulge in my front pocket and reached for my insomnia pills. The bottle was still full. I stood and swallowed the cool autumn air, letting its chill fill my lungs as I savored the joy of breathing.

I glanced towards the lake. I saw my truck parked along the pier. Over the water's surface, fogbanks were clearing. A paddling of ducks enjoyed a swim. The sun was pushing past the horizon, heralded by the echoing chorus of birdsong. I closed my eyes and allowed myself into the wind's gentle embrace. At that moment, I felt free, free of the fear of failure and the weight of impossible expectations. I felt free to enjoy memories of the past without the obligation of guilt. Just for a second, it felt like my sister was there, sitting next to me. She listened to the birds and trilled along with them. She smiled at me warmly, squeezing my hand. Then, as I exhaled, she rushed away with my breath.

I made my way into the old house. The door barely functioned as it should. Decades of corrosion and neglect have left the deadbolt ineffective. A shoulder to the door frame forced it open, revealing a sprawling mess of splintered wood, bare walls, and broken glass. Overgrown weeds shot up through the wooden floorboards. It was the same house I remembered, the resting bones of life, long expired.

I stepped into the foyer and made my way up the creaky wooden staircase to the second floor. The entire place smelled of must and age. I walked around the room, reconstructing the image as I always saw it in my dreams. The cheap wallpaper and shoddy thrift store furniture from my youth had been completely stripped away. A ratty mattress and an old, splintered writing desk continued as the sole survivors of our family's exodus. With a solid push, I forced the desk aside.

Behind a loose floorboard, I pulled out a dirt-covered box. From my pocket, I revealed that last family photo we took in front of the lake. I flipped it over, pulling free a silver key taped to its back. With

a gentle twist of the key, the lockbox snapped open with a firm click. Inside were pages upon pages of yellowed manuscript. I quickly fanned through them, 600 pages of guilt, resentment, and antipathy. Then I flipped to a page with a single line printed:

“To my dearest sister. It should have been me.”

In one violent motion, I tore the pages apart. I kept tearing, shredding the pages into dust until my hands were raw. After my work, there was nothing left to tear. What remained of the book was now white flakes of confetti scattered across the rotting wood floors like snow. Dusting my hands, I stared at the ceiling as tears streamed down my cheeks. I stepped to the window for one last look at the lake from above. Then I opened the door and left. Some stories didn't need to be written, I decided. Some stories are better lived.