

WEDNESDAY NIGHT DRUGS CLUB

By Greg Stolze

The Wednesday night drugs club spun off of a book club when an aging physician got a frightening diagnosis. Her treatments, she knew, were going to be increasingly horrible with diminishing returns. She opted, instead, to get wrecked on prescription meds every Wednesday with some friends.

She died after six months, but two of the friends were also doctors. They kept it going for a while, though they kicked the schedule back to every other week, generally agreeing that if you only got high once every two weeks, *and at no other time*, you weren't going to get addicted. By the time one bowed out of it and the other moved away, it was established and had its own momentum.

When Jerry joined, there were no MDs prescribing fentanyl or adderall, so the group was reduced to street drugs and whatever they could shake out of a pill mill. For the most part, it was fine. Because they weren't addicts—because it was a once-every-other-week thing—the chemicals were usually an addition to socialization, not a replacement for it.

The rules of the club were informal, but not quite unspoken. If you asked Jerry to recite them, he'd consider for a moment, then say, "Bring enough to share. No untested mixing. No booze. Trusted sources. Don't bring guests... unless they're OK."

The last one, the rule about guests, that had to be treated more like a guideline, because there was attrition. People dropped out, or they did the opposite and couldn't hold their consumption down to once every fourteen days. So people who were in the group would sound out the others for permission to bring in someone who was always described as smart, and chill, and trustworthy, and really interesting. In other words, the exact opposite of what most people think of, when asked to imagine someone who wants to get high.

Jerry was effectively a lock for admission because he was recommended by Terry, and Terry owned Under Covers, a tiny new-and-used bookstore that was revered across two states for its collection of mysteries. She got by more on internet sales and events than walk-in clientele, but she owned the store outright and its back room provided a pretty good meeting space.

Jerry had known Terry back when they were smoking up in the dorm at the University of Missouri, far more than bi-weekly. They reconnected on Facebook after she got divorced and he underwent what he called a "personal implosion" and had to move back to Maryland Heights, just outside of St. Louis.

The group had two other members (Burt and Mallory) who were clockwork-regular, as well as maybe six or seven who showed up, now and again, at Under Covers' closing time, often with bags of carryout food and, sometimes, wearing hats with brims pulled real low. But it was only regulars the night they mistakenly ingested Real Estate. At that point, they didn't even know what it was properly called.

Burt brought it. He was the oldest and, arguably, the funkiest member of the group. He described himself as a musician but, when pressed, admitted that he earned most of his income as a sound technician and, if pressed further, would further acknowledge that most of that sound editing was removing unfortunate squeaks, thuds and farts from pornographic movies.

The fourth regular was Mallory or, as Terry privately called her when talking with Jerry outside the group, "sex-worker Mallory." Jerry couldn't help feeling this was unfair, as *he'd* never asked about Mallory's job and *she'd* never volunteered it but, there it was and so he had to have that in the back of his mind every time he handed her a spliff or bent over to help her grind up some pills.

If you're wondering what they look like, picture a frumpy middle-aged woman in jeans and a turtleneck sweater, with a gray bob and heavy tortoiseshell glasses over luminous green eyes. Next to her, a man who could only be called "elderly," his black skin corrugated with wrinkles. He's got silver dreadlocks and mirrored aviator shades, and is wearing a Sex Pistols t-shirt under a jeans jacket covered with band logos and worn-white fuzz patches. The other man wears chinos, a polo shirt, a windbreaker. His hair is close-cropped, starting to recede, but his sad eyes are clear and sharp. Finally, a slender woman, the youngest, at least a head shorter than the others, with Warhol-white hair, pink-frost lipstick and fingernails, and a tattoo of mantises dancing around one bicep, their forelegs interlocked and upraised.

The day of the Real Estate, Burt was leaning on the counter by the cash register as Terry methodically marked down books that had been on the shelves for more than a year. They were talking about Black Lives Matter.

"There's something horrible about having something that was always invisibly present become apparent," Terry said.

"What do you mean, 'invisibly present'? I knew better than to go to Ferguson ten years ago," Burt replied.

Terry nodded, conceding the point as Jerry entered.

“Now, the ‘invisibly present’ thing that’s getting, like, unclocked, is how bad it is *everywhere*. I mean, it used to be the folks in Florida could shake their damn heads about how George Zimmerman wouldn’ta gotten away with it anywhere else. But, whoops, no! Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland... everyone’s realized that *every place* can be the worst place.”

“I read a thing on the internet,” Jerry said, as he often did, “About how funny it is that UFOs stopped visiting and cops started shooting people right about the same time that phones got cameras.”

“Oh, the UFOs are still around,” Burt said. “I seen some footage that got leaked from an Air Force base that would curl your hair.”

“That sounds great,” Jerry deadpanned, pinching a tiny bit of buzz-cut between his fingertips. “So Burt, you working on anything cool these days?”

“Helping this one youngblood get his Soundcloud shit together. There’s a jazz jam that’s in and out on Friday nights, but it’s been more off than on, y’know?”

“So no great porn titles?” Jerry said with a smile.

Burt sighed. “The guy who does all the fake SF stuff? His latest is *Destination Poon*.”

“Gosh I hope it’s out in time for Christmas,” Terry said.

“Hey, it’s work.”

Just then, Mallory walked in and flipped the door sign around to “closed.”

“How’s it going?” Burt asked.

“Ugh. I don’t want to be one of those people who says ‘Wow, I really *need drugs*,’ but if I was going to be one of those people, who says that, today would be the day it got said.”

“Poor sweetie,” Terry said, coming from behind the counter.

“You holding?” Mallory asked. “That rat bastard Frankie got thrown out of college and isn’t returning my calls.”

“I can set you up,” Terry said.

“Hey, and I brought toasted raviolis,” Jerry said. “They’re still... pretty warm.”

"You all just going to blaze? Or you in the mood for something a little extra?" Burt asked as they followed Terry back to the stockroom. They had to walk single-file. The store was cramped.

"What've you got?" Jerry asked.

"Psilocybin! God's Flesh, man! Make you see mandalas an' shit, re-arrange all your mental furniture."

"I just want dope," Mallory said, as Terry obligingly fished a baggie from a hollowed-out copy of *The Da Vinci Code*.

"'S been proven to promote psychological openness and reduce anxieteeee..." Burt crooned, shaking his own tiny plastic envelope of capsules.

"You boys go on some pirated shamanic journey over there, Mallory and I are going to unwind over here. We'll keep you from jumping off the building, getting naked or chewing each others' faces off."

"You're thinking of Bath Salts," Jerry said. "That's next time. So where'd you get these?" he asked Burt, as Terry started loading up Mallory's pipe, which was shaped like H.R. Geiger's Xenomorph from *Alien*.

"Aw, you heard me talk about Lodon, right?"

"Your actual-factual, no shit full time drug dealer?"

"Well yeah, but he's not like some Ice Cube with an AK-47 heavy motherfucker, y'know? He's not buying shit from the Mexican Mafia and, and, like, murdering stoop rats. Mostly it's weird stuff from California and New Jersey, designer stuff, or else hippie shit, acid and DMT and whatnot."

"I thought God's Flesh was a mushroom," Jerry said, frowning down at the brown oblong he'd pinched into his hand.

"I asked him what the dose ought to be and he said one or two pills oughtta do it, so I figure it's either dried and, like, concentrated, or else they just distilled out the active ingredient. Bottoms up!" With that, Burt popped two capsules back into his throat.

"I'm starting with one," Jerry said, filling a conic paper cup from the corner water cooler.

They got high.

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The drug hit Jerry about ten minutes after ingestion. It was sudden and hard. He was sitting in a rolling chair that constantly shed black plastic off its fake-leather arms, revealing black nylon fabric underneath, wondering if he should take a second capsule, and then everything tipped and slid and blew open with steady white light.

He felt embraced by an alien weight across his body, horizontal bands of thick tissue. His hands, moving of their own accord, slid over something smooth and warm, an embrace of ivory-colored lines and slender triangles, and then the sound, the sound, the sound...

It went from silence in an instant to hoots like apes, a clatter, roars not of animals but something bigger, newer, more foreign to flesh, everything was simultaneously seizing Jerry and raising him up, the sensation of getting something longed-for but wrong, wrong...

Then the dark plunge, everything colored again but dim, murky, brown and gray and artificial, an arm with hair and muscles flinging him like a ragdoll, the arm falling on his back and Jerry didn't feel the blows as pain but as humiliation, disappointment, loss, this ridiculous sensation of having sold what he'd always wanted for something else he'd always wanted and winding up with neither...

And then he was back in the chair, staring at Mallory. She was staring back.

"Where'd you get that mole?" Jerry blurted.

"What?"

He pointed at her face, at her upper lip. She wiped, he blinked, there was nothing.

"Are you OK, Jerry?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You were... *really* tripping," she said.

It was only then that Jerry realized the room was different. There were no windows, so the light hadn't changed, but the ceiling had a haze of reefer smoke, and the styrofoam food clamshell had been emptied out and thrown in the trash. And his mouth was incredibly dry.

"What...?" He coughed, stood—checked his balance, good, it was stable—and went over to the bubbler. After two paper triangles of water, he was able to ask, "How much time has passed?"

“About ninety minutes.”

“Jesus.”

Mallory laughed. She had a nice, throaty chuckle, especially after smoking. “You were lying there kind of stroking your chest and upper thigh,” she said. “You go off to the cosmic rooftop and kick it with the Self-Transforming Machine Elves or something?”

“No machine elves just... light. Then darkness. Then a beating.”

“Shit. You OK?”

“I... think I am... now,” he said, throwing away his cup and rubbing his fingers against his thumbs. “Where’s Burt?”

“He went to the bathroom and after a while, Terry went to check on him.” Mallory ground her palms into her reddened eyes. “We prolly ought to see how they’re doing,” she said, but she didn’t try to rise up off the couch.

“I... guess I’ll do it?”

The tiny bathroom was cramped for one, and with both Terry and Burt inside there was literally no space for Jerry to get in. Burt was sitting on the closed toilet, weeping, while Terry awkwardly pulled paper towels out of the dispenser and handed them to him.

“You want to tag in here?” she said. “Or are you wrecked too?”

“What happened?” Jerry asked.

Terry slid past him sideways, through the door and said, “He was in here staring at himself in the mirror, then when I came in he started singing ‘Happy Birthday’ and his pupils were both the size of... fuckin’... like the top of a full coffee cup,” she said. “You were pretty out of it too.”

“Yeah, I only took half what he did,” Jerry said, glancing at Burt.

“OK, I’m...” Terry trailed off, shrugged, and went back to the sofa with Mallory. Unsure what else to do, Jerry entered the bathroom.

“Hey,” he said. “Hey there buddy.”

“So alone and never a second of privacy, ah gahd,” Burt said, softly. He pulled off a foot-long strip of toilet paper and blew his nose hard. “Oh shit man. Fuck.”

"You crashing?"

"Ah... nah," Burt said, leaning back. "Not really. That was just... fuck, a hell of a thing."

"Bad trip?"

Burt stood, his back and knees audibly cracking as he stretched. "Yes and no, y'know? It wasn't, like, *fun*, but it was... real. Like extra-real, you know?"

"Maybe."

"Like watching a really good, sad movie, only it wasn't a movie, it was more real than that. Maybe more real than regular life."

"Well, if we were happy with the realness levels on regular life, we wouldn't be meeting here on Wednesdays, right?"

Burt laughed. "There's unreal and then there's ill-real and then there's this. I mean, what was it like for you?"

"I don't even know man. It was not cool colors and... what did you say, reduced anxiety? Increased psychological openness? No man. Not that."

Burt sighed. "I guess I better go tell Terry I'm all right," he said. "Thank her for the babysitting."

"You are OK now?"

"Yeah, just the usual aches and pains and pre-senile dementia," Burt said with a light cackle. "That... yeah, it turned off like a switch, didn't it?"

"Same for me," Jerry replied.

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The idea of Wednesday night drugs club was that, afterwards, a member would be straightedge. The ones who went overboard, started using on their own time... they got declined. Terry would stop letting them in. She had a few connections and would, if pressed, send former members to them to get meth or club drugs or cocaine or whatever. Mostly, the ex-members were grateful to have more frequent access to chemicals or, if not grateful, at least distracted. The salespeople and middlemen were also pleased to have someone who was more of a frequent flyer than Terry, and if the club rejects started to get desperate and irrational, they almost always fixated on the people whom they knew had a *lot* of drugs all the time, rather than Terry, who only had some drugs

infrequently. Now, once the pusher told them to fuck off they might come crawling back to Terry begging, or else run back threatening. That had led to some bad scenes, one of which Terry managed on her own and one from which Burt was able to extract her. Sometimes, it was almost enough to make her quit 100%, but the lure of Wednesdays was strong in her. It wasn't just being altered. (Though, to be clear, Terry was fond of getting altered.) She *liked* Jerry and Burt, and she even liked Mallory. She enjoyed hearing what had happened to them, what their lives were like, what their perspectives were on current events and cinema and music.

Terry would never have admitted this to the others, but part of her enjoyment was looking back afterwards, during the dull parts of her days, and chuckling over the Wednesday previous. Sometimes not even a laugh, just a little smile as she remembered developing a brilliant, unworkable plan for solving society's ills, then dissolving into giggles.

But it wasn't the same after the boys tripped on Real Estate (and still, none of them had heard that name for the drug). Something about Burt's singing, falsetto and breathy and unlike the way he usually sang. Something *familiar*. It plagued her as she grimaced at an Arthur Miller collection, mistakenly shipped to her alongside Sue Grafton's latest. It bothered her, like an unscratchable spot on her back, when she went by a revival theater playing *The Seven Year Itch*. Something about it bugged her every time she saw a woman with curly blonde hair, or a white dress with a plunging neckline.

It was nothing compared to what Jerry was going through, though.