

## The Effects of Laudanum

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name this particular spot after me. I don't know where I was going with that. I have a tendency to lose track of things, as Mom used to say. I think it's just impossible to focus and live in Laudanum at the same time. Laudanum's the name of my town, not that you've ever heard of it since it is mostly just the one intersection of Chillicothe and Route 87 out in Ohio Amish country. No ones calls it Route 87, they call it Boulevoux Road, after some guy named Boulevoux, whom I never met. The rest of the town is Amish people and strip malls and the two rarely conflate. I stand next to the Marathon station and across from the Dairy Queen, 197 feet from where Boulevoux's daughter died, and I am positioned so that when five-speeds come off a red light they downshift as they pass me, as if I'm the catalyst for their propulsion instead of just a cow, or a guy in a cow suit with a high school diploma and a sign that reads Rancho's Restaurant in lazy letters.

I wave mostly. I wave to the east-west traffic on Chillicothe and watch for crashes. Although there are only a couple thousand people in Laudanum, we hold the record for the most traffic accidents per capita in the entire state of Ohio. Four years running. It isn't even close. Something like five hundred a year. Few people that live in Laudanum get into accidents, but cars trying to skirt the turnpike by coming across on Chillicothe to I-270 don't know any better. I see two accidents a day at least, mostly fender benders but sometimes the occasional ditch dive or engine fire. I wave at them all. Inside my oversized cow head with the googly eyes and the foam rubber that reeks of mildew and cat litter, I look out through the slackjawed mouth that barely seeps in enough air to keep me conscious. No one can see in, not that anyone is trying, which makes it easier just to wave and not be bothered.

When there is no traffic at the 10:34 and 2:55 lulls, I wave to the clerk at the Marathon station who I used to go to high school with, even though I never said a word to him because he was in the lower-level classes. He doesn't know I am in the cow suit but he seems to flick me off on principle. If he's busy smoking a joint in the back room, I wave to the four-shop strip mall behind me. Wa Sun, Ms. Zinn's Fortune Telling, Ready-to-Go Dry Cleaning, and a bakery that went out of business a couple months ago. A bustling metropolis, I know. There is always a glare on the windows no matter what time of day it is, so I never know if they are waving back, or if there is anyone there at all.

I don't wave to the cop. He can go fuck himself.

I landed this job when the manager of Rancho's, a mustachioed guy named Randy, asked what my advertising skills were. I said I knew how to speak Spanish and then he gave me the cow suit. He didn't tell me that the costume was actually a felt-lined death chamber that would blaze like the fires of hell in summer rush hour. Of course it was still spring then, way before the city decided to solve the traffic problem, and I desperately needed something to do during the days.

But good Lord does it get hot in that thing. It has a stiff cardboard belly that collapses like an accordion when I take it off. I guess it doesn't help that I can't move off the five foot square of asphalt nestled between the Marathon station, the strip mall parking lot, and the westbound lane of Chillicothe. This particular scrap of tarmac is privately owned with no regulations on soliciting. But if I wanted to step off of it, say, to eat, or air out my bovine-shaped fertilizer plant, I have to cover my sign and remove my head. That's what Randy told me. He made sure I was clear on that point. I don't think he wanted cops coming into his place complaining about advertising technicalities when he had a bunch of illegal immigrants working the grills. He should have been more worried about the health inspectors since I'm pretty sure no one in that place could tell the difference between a rat and a cow and it was a crapshoot which would end up in the fajitas. Not that they are really authentic fajitas, or authentic Mexicans for that matter. Their dialect sounded Dominican more than anything. I don't know where I was going with that.

Six months after Boulevard's daughter died on Chillicothe, the town council brought in city inspectors to figure out why there were so many accidents. I took the week off. I never clocked in at Rancho's anyway, just sent in my hours at the end of the week and kept the cow suit in the trunk of my car.

My dad was visiting his sister in Santa Fe, but I couldn't go because I was taking summer classes. I wasn't taking summer classes, but my dad did

not know that. Of course, he hadn't said more than a howdy-do to me in six months, just went to work, came home, went to work, and came home. For six months. I stopped talking to him out of spite. If he isn't going to talk to me, then I sure as hell am not going to talk to him. I even stopped using his name, went back to my mother's maiden. It's more European sounding, although I have not had the opportunity to try it out on anyone.

That damn cop parks his cruiser in the alley between Marathon and the Dry Cleaners and sits there all day, sipping from a Chicken Shack cup, adjusting his rearview mirrors, and making sure I don't cut through the parking lot. They put him as close to the intersection as possible as an accident prevention, which obviously doesn't do squat. I didn't know how much he could see since he wore sunglasses all the time, no matter if the sun was out or not. Sunglasses always covered his eyes.

The city inspectors said there weren't enough signs.

SPEED LIMIT 25, PED XING, STOP LIGHT AHEAD, NO ENGINE BRAKE.

Then they left. And I went back to waving.

It was brutally hot that week, though. High nineties and ninety percent humidity. I thought my flesh was going to melt off my bones and funnel into sloshy pools in my hooves. The cop kept making trips to the Chicken Shack drive-through to refill his cup, and every time he did I ran across the parking lot to Wa Sun for a glass of water. Eventually I gave up and just sat at the booth behind the sign that told the world Chinese food was available twenty-four hours a day, with my cow head resting on the table and my hoof gloves next to me. When I ordered moo shoo pork and a pitcher of water, the Chinese lady laughed, as she laughed every day at the notion of a guy in a cow suit ordering moo shoo pork.

When I stepped outside again with the nauseating smell of soy sauce and a hint of a newly grown fungus swirling inside the cow head, I saw the cop standing over a fender bender in the Dairy Queen drive. I quickly shuffled back to my spot without his noticing. I usually had to walk all the way to the end of the strip mall and backtrack along the road. It was either that or take off my head and I wasn't about to take off my head.

The accident was minor, but two women were arguing like banshees over whose fault it was. One of the gals in a business suit yelled at the other as an ice-cream cone melted over her hand. She kept trying to lick up the rivers of chocolate between sentences until she finally just threw the cone into the culvert.

That was when I realized it is impossible to be feared and eat ice cream at the same time.

The cop said he hadn't seen the accident and couldn't say who was to blame so he wouldn't issue any tickets. The ladies exchanged insurance information even though there was almost no damage, leaving behind a half-eaten ice-cream cone and a guy in a cow suit wondering how a cop could miss an accident that happened right in front of him.

Two days later, after the five-car pileup, the town council shipped in a crew of civil engineers from surrounding counties to take a crack at it. Top guys. College degrees and all. I was perfectly aware of the problem after standing out there for six months, but no one had asked me so I wasn't offering the information. Just a cow waving in the same place every day.

The college degrees suggested adding a middle lane.

Idiots.

When the ODOT people showed up, they brought the cavalry. Wheeling around surveying instruments and complicated data-collecting machines, they marked off sections of the road with tape and put up wooden stakes with numbers written in thick Sharpie. The two-hundred-foot mark was three feet past me. It seemed to me that a fifth grader with handy knowledge of a fifty-meter fishing line and at least one opposable thumb could have done the same thing, but what does a guy in a cow suit know?

The answer, of course, is more than the Ohio Department of Transportation.

They tried to interview me, thinking that I might be a distraction to drivers, but they couldn't understand any of the names I called them through the foam rubber.

"Do you mind taking off your head?" the man asked, wiping his forehead with his tie.

I shook my head, which was more of a full-body waddle from side to side.

They left me alone after that.

But they always ate at the Wa Sun. Every goddamn day, and I had to take my moo shoo next door to Miss Zinn.

Miss Zinn couldn't have been more than thirty, but tried to pass herself off as older, dipping into the mysteries of the elderly. Her face was young, and her bangs gave her away. She wore a handkerchief wrapped around her head and large mood rings on her fingers. But I would catch glimpses of an AC/DC shirt

under her shawl or the Playboy bunny tattoo on her upper arm. She let me sit with her as long as I brought some rice and fortune cookies and listened to her complain about the shoddy business.

“No one in this town cares about their future,” she said.

“I don’t think Mennonites are into palm readings.”

“You want your future told?” She rapped her long fingernails on the circular table that was actually a chlorine barrel with a sheet over it. I stabbed my fork into the rest of my rice and shoved it all into a plastic bag.

“I have to get back at it,” I said.

For three weeks the ODOT people surveyed the town, focusing on the main intersection, but sometimes I’d see them on back roads and even scooting around parking lots. I have no idea what they were doing. They weren’t even looking in the right place.

So for three weeks I ate at Miss Zinn’s.

“Good fortune is around the corner,” she said, dropping the slip of paper and biting into the beige cookie.

“Fortune is my fortune. Wonderful.”

“Well,” she said, picking up the other fortune on the table, “mine says, ‘Don’t be afraid of hurt or wisdom’ and that doesn’t even make sense.”

I nodded with a mouth full of food. A snap pea had fallen on her remarkably clean floor, staining it brown with soy sauce. I couldn’t bend at the waist sitting down so I had to let it sit there.

“These things never make sense,” she said. “At least I give plausible fortunes.”

“Why are there so many accidents, then?” I asked.

“There are some things that are clouded from the vision of all mortals.”

“I know why.”

She stared at me with a puzzled look but didn’t ask.

“You’d be a good mascot,” she said slyly. “What’s Ashland University’s mascot? An eagle?”

I tossed the rest of my lunch into the garbage can and picked up my head. I was not going to be roped into another conversation about that.

“You can’t go on forever. You got to let it go,” she said as I let the door close behind me.

I never told her the reason for the accidents. She’s a fortuneteller, she can figure it out for herself. The future wasn’t supposed to be a mystery to her . . . and her floor was so clean, as if she knew that was all people looked at. It was extremely clean. I still have no idea what the ceiling looked like in that place. I

don't know where I was going with that, but the ODOT suits left the next day after adding a few more signs and calling it a job well done.

Laudanum has three body shops within a square mile of one another, each with a plume of dented cars radiating from their epicenters and two tow trucks in their lots. My dad wanted me to get a job with one of them when I graduated high school. "Learn a trade, at least," he said, but I told him I signed up for classes like Mom had wanted me to, and he let it go. That might have been the longest conversation I've had with him six months. I didn't care that I lied to him. He lied to me. He said he was fine.

He wasn't fine. I wasn't fine. College was too far away from this place, this place we were in. Laudanum doesn't let you leave so easily.

I've only once seen all six tow trucks in use at the same time, and that was in the biggest crash in Laudanum's history, a ten-car smashup on the hottest day of the year, where someone didn't stop, someone didn't go, and someone didn't live.

Cars filed so far back they got smudged together in the heat waves. I was dying in my suit. I felt like a clay statue being fired in a kiln. I was ready to call it a day when I heard the screeches followed by the crashes and then decided to stick around. The cop took off in his car, slowly rolling past the Marathon pumps until he put the Crown Vic in park less than a hundred meters away from where he started. A school bus full of elementary school kids sat right in front of me, and the kids kept pointing at me out the half-windows with their short, pink arms. The bus looked like a giant sea anemone.

I pulled off my hoof gloves and, using a shard of concrete, I drew the rough image of a cow on the ground. It took some time because my head kept falling off and I had to hold it on with my other hand, not to mention that I could almost hear my own skin frying as if it were being dipped in a vat of oil over at the Chicken Shack.

The kids really liked the cow, clapping and laughing, so I drew another and another.

After I drew five goofy-smiled cows, I wrote "cow herd" in big letters. The heat was making me light-headed and extremely tired and I almost couldn't finish etching the words. The kids on the bus yelled, "Look at the cow herd, look at the cow herd." People in their cars glanced over, then turned away, listening to radios, and burning up in the afternoon heat. The exhaust from the idling cars mixed with the sun and started to make me nauseous. And those kids wouldn't stop yelling, "Look at the cow herd, look at the cow herd, look at the cow herd, look at the cow herd." At one point I thought of heat stroke,

and I looked up briefly for the cop car, but couldn't keep my eyes upright. I tried walking to Wa Sun or Miss Zinn's, but couldn't, as if my hooves had melted into the asphalt. My eyes stung with perspiration but I couldn't wipe them without showing my head and I couldn't do that. All I could do was stay in my spot, this eternal spot, keeping my eyes down to let the sweat drip off my eyelashes and listen to those kids who wouldn't shut up. They just kept chanting cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, cow herd, look at the coward."

My mother died in a car crash six months ago. Did I mention that?

"Hey, are you just going to sit there?" I yelled through the cow head, only then realizing it is impossible to be feared and wear a cow suit at the same time.

The cop jerked his head around as if he hadn't seen me storming up to his cruiser. It had cooled off that day, overcast and gloomy.

"What happened to you?" he asked, picking something out of his teeth. His sunglasses tilted on the fulcrum of his nose when he moved his cheek.

"What do you mean what happened to me? Didn't you see them? I thought it'd be pretty hard to miss three kids pelting a six-foot-tall cow with water balloons filled with red dye. Especially since it happened, I don't know, fifty feet in front of your face."

"I can't understand you, son. Take off your head."

I pointed to my spot, and moved my face closer to the opening so he could at least make out the words.

The cop looked out his windshield. The remains of the colored balloons sat crumpled like eggshells, their red yolks bleeding into the street and darkening the asphalt. Any liquid that wasn't on the ground was being absorbed into my costume, giving it the soothing shades of a slaughterhouse.

"I didn't see anything," he said.

"How is that possible! It was right there. They even took the time to collect the balloons that didn't pop and throw them again."

I smacked the hood of the car and left behind a dripping red smear.

"Son, if you do that again I'll write you up."

"Why don't you just write me up now? Look at me, wheeeee, advertising on private property. Or can't you see this either?"

The cop didn't smile but didn't frown either.

"Son, do you really think that I care about you walking across a parking lot? This town has 1.4 car accidents a day; do you think I care about you at

all? Do you think that there is any . . .” He looked down. “I lost my train of thought.”

I wanted to jab my soggy hoof right through those smug sunglasses.

“Maybe you should pay more attention, then. Maybe if you did, some people wouldn’t have to die.”

The words held a palpable spite, a deserved meanness that had been wallowing in my gut for six months. I unleashed it on him like I was indestructible, like I really was the catalyst that made the cars heading west on Chillicothe accelerate on the downshift.

“I was filling out some paperwork,” he said. “Can’t see everything.”

“Unbelievable,” I said kicking the air and putting my arms on my bulbous hips. The Chicken Shack girl was handing a Styrofoam cup out the drive-thru window, her nametag dangling off her chest and wisps of hair tucked behind her ears.

I turned to walk directly across the parking lot.

“Next time,” I said, “I’ll wear a headset and grow a nice rack so you can adjust your rearview mirrors for me.”

He couldn’t have heard me. Talking in that suit was like yelling into a pillow. But the cop leaned his head out the window nevertheless.

“By the way,” he said, “the Rancho Restaurant went out of business months ago. What are you even doing out here still?”

It isn’t hard to figure out why there are so many accidents in Laudanum. It is impossible to look toward the direction you want to go. Everyone is always looking down, trying to stop their ice cream from melting instead of eating it and moving on. No one looks ahead. No one looks to the future. They can read the signs just fine, but they ignore them, as if they are distractions instead of warnings. It isn’t enough to keep your eyes on the road. You have to look where the road is taking you. Not that I could do anything about it. I was just like everybody else in this town. Laudanum seems to have that effect.

Which is why, when I got hit by a car, I never saw it coming. The report says that another car, pulling out of the DQ, couldn’t go around the pothole while unwrapping a straw and holding a slushy at the same time. That is actually written in the report. Couldn’t go around the pothole while unwrapping a straw and holding a slushy at the same time. The car crossed the double yellow, which forced another car to swerve into me.

The woman with the slushy had stopped, which is why we know she had a slushy, but the other car downshifted and kept moving. Like I was a catalyst.

It never stopped. The foam-rubber suit absorbed almost the entire impact but the cow head rolled all the way to the #4 pump at the Marathon.

I stared into the sky on my back, trying to remember when it was that I last looked up. A giant sun of red hair and obnoxious earrings floated into my view.

“Oh my God, oh my God,” the woman repeated hysterically, the slushy still in hand.

“Where’s my head?” I asked.

“It’s still on your body,” the woman yelled.

“My other head,” I said.

“Officer, officer!” the woman yelled. “Oh my god. He thinks he’s been decapitated! Oh my god.”

A distant jangle of keys turned into a close jangle, and the cop stood over me with that sad and twisted smile. He removed his sunglasses, revealing deep bags under his eyes, channels dug into his skin from tears.

I thought maybe, just maybe, my summer and a lot of other things would come to an end. Just maybe things would start moving again.

“Zack?”

“Hi, Dad.”

“Why aren’t you in school!”

“I don’t go to school,” I said.

“What do you mean you don’t go to school?”

“I’ve been here all summer.”

“What do you think you’re doing? What would your mother think—”

“What was the color of that car that just hit me, Dad? Can you tell me that? You were watching, weren’t you? Or were you adjusting those rearview mirrors again? What would Mom think of that, huh? Great father. Son gets hit by stockcar and the father doesn’t even notice.”

My dad stood upright, looked around, then turned and went back to his car and radioed for an ambulance.

When he came back, he looked down at me. His sunglasses were back over his eyes.

It is impossible to grieve and look up at the same time.

“Are you okay?”

“I just want to lay here for however long I feel like it.”

He took the woman’s statement and walked back to his cruiser to wait. Nothing had ended.

The woman still stood there, sipping her slushy with tears streaming down her face. Her teeth were stained blood red and she just kept sipping away. I

wondered if they would name the road after me. Then there would be two Boulevoux roads, with a really confusing intersection. That probably wouldn't help the accident problem, but maybe they'll