

MEDICINE

After being laid low by the side-effects of a prescription, Alida was on the phone with her doctor.

“These medicines always end up doing what they are not supposed to do.”

Alida and I discussed the ideal medicine.

“It would take away our pain, it would make it easy to breathe, and it would give us energy for the rest of the day.”

This was the perfect recipe.

“I’m not looking to get my energy in a pill. But some days the atmosphere can just pull me down.”

Alida was trying to discover the source of her maladies. She like to tell herself that there was a small switch that she could pull, and she would be all better.

“I was not born to be sick.”

She would do everything that she could to deny the symptoms. But that snake would wrap itself around her and gradually take hold. She needed to shake those influences. She took a deep breath and tried to cast off their effects

“I need something just to be able to survive.”

This wasn’t a matter of popping some aspirin. She was looking for a more thorough remedy.

“I wish that I could work mind over matter.”

Sometimes she would do whatever she could to make herself right. She took a long warm bath. That got the blood flowing. She lay on her bed until the darkness passed.

“I feel good. I am going for a walk.”

After a short walk, she ate a small dinner. Then she retired to her room to watch a little television before bed.

“It is a beautiful sunset. I will feel great in the morning.”

She was up a little after sunrise. The morning light gave her all the power of the day.

“This is better than any medicine.”

That was all that she needed.

She described the whole process.

“Drugs are there to promote the natural defenses of the body. They make us a little sick. And then the immune system kicks in. It recognizes the disease and goes full strength to combat it. But that whole process can destroy you. I take the flu vaccine, and I am out for days. It’s always there.”

“A drug can take you on an odyssey. You start off looking for a remedy. You get the prescription from your doctor. You are desperate for his recommendation. The chemistry embraces your body. You welcome its effects. It give you that comfort that you seek. Everything seem so easy. But there is the dark side.”

“I can feel myself becoming someone else. The blurry vision. The dizzy spells. The chills. At first, I bundle up just trying to restore some order. I am shaking all over. I am seeking a resolution. When will it come?”

“My cure has eluded me. Dr. Jekyll is becoming Mr. Hyde!”

“I am in a dark place. I am looking for a victim. I can’t look at myself in the mirror. I want to hide from the world. The monster festers deep inside of me. It claws at my insides. It makes me ornery.”

“There are so many stories to tell. Disease does not make you friends. You test your loved ones. You question yourself.”

“I review my health history. Those terrible reactions.”

“What do you need?”

“I have this rash that won’t go away. I think that I touched some kind of plant when I was gardening.”

“Take this topically.”

“It seems relatively easy. All that I have to do is apply the cream. And the rash starts to go away. I keep on for a day or so. Then I stop the application. But I have lost my appetite. I am having panic attacks. I feel feverish. I am knocked out. I can’t move.”

“I pull the covers over me and head off to bed. I have become delirious.

“I discontinue the cream. I have this uncontrollable itching. These prickly red spots on my skin. This is worse than the feeling that I started with. What had happened to me?”

“The doctor tells me that I stopped the application too soon. I rub in the cream, and I start to feel better. All the symptoms go away.”

“After a few days, I am convinced that everything is back to normal. I again quit the cream. For a few days, I feel that I am back to normal. No rash. But I start to feel sick to my stomach. The pains are intense. I am again back in bed.”

“I do something strange. I have no rash, but I rub the cream on the formerly affected area. I start to feel better again. This is scaring me. All that I have done is put the cream on my skin. And all these changes have occurred. What is going on?”

“Eventually I am finally able to end the cycle. I use sheer will to break me from the habit. And that is that.”

“Fortunately, I do not face the same exposure when I am in the garden.”

“A little later that season, I get stung by a bee. And the feeling are so overwhelming.”

“I have been stung before. And it is no big deal. A few days later, I feel a tenderness on my arm. I am feverish. Again, nothing. But I am starting to think that something else is going on. I call my doctor. He recommends some kind of anti-allergen. The effects again dissipate. But I am getting hit by something. I am in bed for days. I have gotten a case of the flu. All from this bee sting.”

“The bee sting again goes away. And I think that I am better. But I get some kind of strange reaction from the drug. This is days later. My skin gets all red where I was stung. And there is this rash that moves out from there.”

“I do what I can to ride it out. I am in some pain. There is an itching. But nothing else. I wonder if I should have taken the anti-allergen. The rash goes away, and I am back to normal. No more bee sting. No more rash. I close the book on that one. I do my best to stay away from the bees.”

“One evening, I am outside for an unusually long time. Perhaps, I am watching the stars. And I get bit by some mosquitoes. It seems like nothing. I try not to let it affect me. But I am feeling ill.”

“I go to bed. I hope to be over it in the morning. I feel dizzy. And it is really red where the mosquitoes have bit me. I get a cream from the drugstore. And it make the redness go away. But I still feel dizzy. And I can’t eat. I am nauseous. I am sure that I won’t be able to keep it down.”

“Fortunately, the feeling doesn’t last. I am more careful to spray bug repellent. I hope that is all that it takes. I don’t have any recurrence of the mosquito problem. But I do get some other kind of bite when I am digging in the garden.”

“I find the aloe cream. It soothes, but the bite is becoming swollen. I can feel this poison inside of me. It lingers. And I am feeling sick to my stomach. My hand is looking worse. I wonder if I got it affected.”

“I call my doctor, and I explain to him what is going on. He wants to see me. He thinks that it is an allergic reaction. I don’t want to take the anti-allergen. He prescribes something else.”

“I am lucky this time. All the symptoms go away. There is no adverse reaction.”

“A drug can take you on an odyssey. You start off looking for a remedy. You get the prescription from your doctor. You are desperate for his recommendation. The chemistry embraces your body. You welcome its effects. It give you that comfort that you seek. Everything seem so easy. But there is the dark side.”

“I can feel myself becoming someone else. The blurry vision. The dizzy spells. The chills. At first, I bundle up just trying to restore some order. I am shaking all over. I am seeking a resolution. When will it come?”

“My cure has eluded me. Dr. Jekyll is becoming Mr. Hyde!”

“I am in a dark place. I am looking for a victim. I can’t look at myself in the mirror. I want to hide from the world. The monster festers deep inside of me. It claws at my insides. It makes me ornery.”

“I could feel all these lights coming at me. I thought that I was being hypnotized. I was in a fog. I was losing my mind. What was happening to me. What were they giving me. I could feel my whole body all turned around.”

He had been waiting all afternoon at a diner. His friend was more than late. He was a no show. Cowboy had no idea what he was going to do next.

“I can’t wait here all my life.”

He had no money and few friends in the city.

“Give me another piece of pie. I have just enough money for another piece of pie.”

He played with his fork in the pie.

“Are you looking for a friend?”

Cowboy already had a friend. He didn’t need someone standing him up again.

“They call me Flip. I can buy you some dinner if you like.”

“I’m good. I’ve been filling myself up with pie all afternoon.”

“That pie’s not that nutritious.”

“I’m going to be okay.”

“Do you want to make a little money?”

“I’m not into no illegal stuff.”

“This ain’t illegal. I just want you to deliver a package to a friend.”

“A package?”

“Some art supplies.”

“You can’t take care of it yourself.”

“I’ve got some other jobs to do. Maybe you could help. I told you that I can give you some money.”

“I need more than money. I need a place to stay.”

“What’s your name?”

“Cowboy. They call me Cowboy.”

“You can stay with me if you do this job.”

“I just have to drop off a package.”

“I can take care of it. Just give me the address.”

“Meet me back here when you’re done. Maybe around six.”

Cowboy wondered what was in the package. He didn’t ask any questions. And he didn’t look. He just dropped it off.

“I’ve got a couch. You can sleep on my couch.”

They took the train to Flip’s place. Cowboy had his bag with him.

“This is where you can stay. Bathroom’s in there. I’ve got some more work for you in the morning.”

“More art supplies.”

“Yeah. Where were you going to stay if I hadn’t have met you.”

“I was on the streets. Bridges was supposed to meet me. I was staying with him. I knew his cousin in Nebraska.”

“This is a long way from Nebraska.”

“I had a job in Omaha. But they laid a bunch of us off. Bridges had a cousin back in Omaha. He told me that there opportunity in the city. So I followed my dream.”

“What dream? What do you want to do?”

“I heard that this was the place to follow your dreams.”

“I can help set you up. You just have to keep your eyes open and your hands clean.”

Cowboy took a long look at his hands.

“This ain’t like where I’m from. I never had no trouble finding work. Except when I got laid off.”

“So you decided to come East.”

“I needed to get out. I wanted a new life.”

“I can help you get a new life.”

After delivering all morning, Cowboy ended up at the diner.

“Want some pie?”

“Give me the meat loaf with fries.”

“What about something to drink?”

“Give me a coke.”

“What’s a cute boy like you doing hanging around here?”

“I was making deliveries all morning.”

“Who you working for?”

“Flip?”

“You’ve been delivering drugs.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Flip’s a drug dealer.”

“I’m not into that kind of thing. I don’t do drugs. I drink.”

“Honey, I can buy you a drink.”

“They don’t have drinks here.”

“After you eat, we can go out for cocktails.”

“I’m supposed to meet Flip back here.”

“Leave a note for him. Let’s go get some cocktails.”

“I need to get my things.”

“Let’s go get some drinks.”

Cowboy finished his dinner. Then he got some dessert.

“Are you ready to get those cocktails?”

“I am a little full. And I do have to meet Flip.”

“Flip takes care of Flip. Let’s get out of here.”

“Are you married?”

“I have a husband. But he leaves me alone. He lets me do whatever I like. And I like to get cocktails with cute young boys. Do you want to get cocktails?”

“I am up for anything.”

Cowboy gave the waitress a note to give to Flip. Then he left with Willa. She was driving a big, old Cadillac.

She teased him, “This used to be a hearse.”

At the bar Willa did what she could to get him in the mood. She would dance to the music. She told him silly jokes. She wanted to be the life of the party.

They both were pretty drunk.

“Cowboy, I need you to drive me back to my place.”

“I have to meet Flip.”

“Flip is dealing drugs. I need you to get me back home.”

He drove her back to her house. Then he passed out on her couch.

When he got back to Flip’s, Flip was angry.

“You missed all these deliveries.”

“Are you dealing drugs?”

“What are you asking me?”

“Have I been dealing drugs?”

“You really had no idea.”

“You told me that it was all legal.”

“It should be. This is medicine for people’s pain.”

“But it’s against the law. Supposed that someone died doing your medicine.”

“No one is going to die. This is scientific. I know what I’m doing.”

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“You don’t have a job. You don’t have a place to live.”

“Willa is going to help me.”

“Willa. That girl. She is one of my best clients.”

Cowboy had no idea what to do. He had committed himself to Willa. He couldn’t go back to working for Flip.

“I wasn’t sure if you were going to come.”

“Flip acted jealous.”

“I think that he likes you.”

“I’m not really into guys.”

“I love all kinds of guys. I love you, baby.”

“What do you need from me?”

“I need someone to keep an eye on me. There are loads of people who would do me harm if they could.”

This all sounded outrageous. What did she really have in mind?

“I have loads of money.”

“I thought it was your husband’s money.”

“I own my husband. Besides, he is in Miami most of the time. I’ve got a room for you upstairs. No more staying on the couch.”

“All by myself.”

“I don’t mind if you want to visit me and give me back rubs.”

“You are asking quite a lot of me.”

“For a place to stay.”

He knew what she was all about. But he didn’t want to go back to Flip. He didn’t have to deliver drugs anymore.

A few nights later, they were drinking up in her room.

“I am getting tired. I need to sleep.”

“Here. Try some of this. It will make you want to hang out all night.”

He forgot about his pain for a while. He passed out in her bed.

“You’re not going to get rid of me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I fell asleep while we were supposed to be having fun.”

“You kept me company most of the night.”

“I feel groggy.”

“I have something for that.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“No, try some of this.”

“Don’t you expect me to pay you rent to stay in your place?”

“I expect you to look out for me. Keep the creeps out of my face.”

He did what he needed to do. At parties, she would give him a signal, and he would come to the rescue. He was her superhero.

“My superman!”

Half the time, he would pass out in her bed.

“I don’t want your husband shooting me.”

“He wouldn’t dare. He lets me play.”

“We really didn’t do anything.”

“Nothing besides a little kissing.”

“I can’t remember half the things that we do. I’m drinking more now than I ever did in my life. I’m not a drunk.”

“We’re having fun, honey.”

When he was feeling sluggish, he would get her to give him a pick me up.

“This is Flip’s best stuff.”

“It helps me stay balanced.”

He felt how he was getting attached to this whole lifestyle.

“I wish that there was something a little more intense. I feel as if I am always there. But I stop short. I need more of a boost.”

“You’re going to have to inject it.”

“I’m scared of needles.”

“You have nothing to be afraid of.”

It gave him the jolt that he needed. He would lie on the couch in a stupor. Later on, he would perk up. He would seem nervous.

“I need you to go to Flip’s. I need a package.”

He took the car over to the apartment.

“She’s turning you into a junkie.”

“No such thing.”

“When you’re full on, she is going to throw you out!”

“How’s that? She’s attached to me.”

“You can’t trust her. She’s a junkie too.”

“I hardly ever see her using.”

“She is an expert. She tries to stay in control.”

Cowboy told himself that he was not a abuser. But he could feel himself torn apart from the center. He was splitting in half.

“I’m here for some stuff. I need you to front me.”

“That is not a good idea.”

“Willa is good.”

“Better go.”

Cowboy started to steal from the apartment. He was pawning jewelry. He took cash. He tried to control things, but Willa suspected him. It would only be time.

“I want you out.”

“Willa, you’re a junkie too.”

“I’m not a thief. I want you out.”

“You need me.”

“Like I need any hustler from down at the bus station.”

Cowboy was in some real straights. He was going to get left at the bus station.

“Flip, I need you to take me right.”

“You owe me so much money.”

“I need some stuff.”

“Cowboy, you better leave before I have to do something to you.”

“You are going to do something to me.”

Cowboy roughed up Flip. Then he ransacked his apartment. Flip wasn’t going to let it be. He waited until Cowboy came back to the diner. Then he had two of his boys beat Cowboy and leave him in an alley.

Cowboy went back to Willa.

“You look a mess. What am I going to do with you?”

“You’re not alone.”

“I’ve got a new boy. He’s clean.”

“I need your help.”

“I can’t let you in.”

“I need you to let me in.”

“I’m going to call the police if you don’t get out of here.”

“You are aren’t going to call the police on me.”

“You need to take a look at yourself. You are a mess. And you are totally out of control.”

“Baby, I need you.”

“You are a mess!”

He just collapse in the hall. Willa got her other boy to drag him inside.

“Post, you better go.”

“For this. You’re taking him back.”

“He needs me now. I’ll send for you later.”

She nursed Cowboy back to health.

“I don’t want you using anymore. The book is closed on that sort of life.”

The Queen of the Hellions was telling Cowboy to clean up his act. He wondered if he stood a chance. But she did her best to be a shining example for him.

“You missing the sweet stuff.”

“Flip, I am clean now.”

“A junkie is never clean.”

“Buy me a piece of pie, and let’s call it even.”

“I can buy you a piece of pie. But if you can get me some money, I can set you up.”

Cowboy relished the pie. But he loved the promise more. His mind was working in overtime. He knew where he could get the money. He realized where Willa kept her purse.

When he snuck back to her place, Cowboy realized what his plans were. He stood in the hallway with the lights on and stared at the bedroom door. He knew that he was deep. He had no choice. That power rolled over him. He slithered up to the door. He didn’t even need the lights on. He found her purse and emptied it of the cash. Then he made his getaway.

“I’m here for the stuff.”

“Just like clockwork. She didn’t catch you.”

“She didn’t even know that I was in her place.”

“You are a bad man!”

“I am a desperate man. And you know what is my weakness.”

After he shot up, Flip had his boys dump him in some alley. There wasn’t much left of him.

When he came to, he had only one thought in his mind. He was going to clean out Willa for good. He waited until she left her place. Then he snuck in and started to reconnoiter. He just filled up with anything that he could pawn. Anything that he wasn’t tied down. On the way out, Willa and Post blocked his way.

Post knocked him down and Willa came at him with a knife. It was getting more than desperate.

He was bleeding as he slipped on the stairs. Post tried to restrain him. But he pushed him back. He did what he could to get out. Post was on his trail. But he kept dodging him until

he got away. He was still dripping blood. He needed to get to the hospital. He didn't have any money, but he flagged down a cab. He collapsed in the back seat. The driver had mercy on him. He saw the blood.

Cowboy woke up in a hotel bed. He was feeling desperate. He didn't want to go back to the streets. He was lucky that the driver didn't leave him to die. He couldn't go back to the streets.

He needed to change. What was he going to do?

One of the social workers got him enrolled in a program.

"You are going to a half-way house. There are rules. You are going to have to obey them. Or you are out on your own. You can't hang around with your drug associates.

"I hear that Willa did a number on you."

"That is all past. I have a new life."

"New for how long. I've got a shipment."

"Fip, I am over that life."

"You still have a weakness for pie."

"I have a weakness for life. But I have the power to stand on my own."

"You know where I am."

When he got back to house, he thought about the offer. Now it was his death sentence. He couldn't go back.

The next time that he dug his fork into that pie, he thought about the days. That sweetness reminded him of his old life. He wanted that sense of excitement. He needed the motivation.

"I wasn't a different person. That was me!"

When he took his last bite of pie, he knew where he was going. This was hard. This was his cure.

"Cigarette smoking once ruled my world. Once you are hooked by cigarettes, it seems as if you can never let go. There are those moments when you feel the urge to light up. It takes over the body."

"It is so automatic. You feel that pressure, and you light up. It is something beyond you. I never felt so hooked to a substance. This had become my drug. I would retreat to my corner with my cigarettes. The smell filled the place. It took over."

"I wanted to quit. But I couldn't. I would keep going back. It was just there. I would buy a carton. And I would smoke them over the week. I kept the supply going. It was so easy. I was feeding my habit. The feeling would shake me, and I would light up. I kept myself going."

"It was everywhere around me. I couldn't get rid of it. It was part of my life. It was killing me."

"I was having some respiratory problems. I had been in the hospital. I told myself no more. And that was that. I just quit. It was amazing. It seemed almost impossible. I told it to go away, and away it went."

"I knew there was a power in me. I wanted it to go deeper. I opened up that well deep. I could shut off that desire. It confirmed that strength. It reassured me."

"These medicines could do many things. They could steal your from death and give you life. But they could also grip you tightly. Sometimes it was hard to let go. And I felt that power overwhelm me. It was everywhere."

Lyla lived near the train yards. And she could feel the crushing steel carves its way hour after hour. It got deep inside her. It was part of her nature. She resented it. She tried to put it out of her mind. It was her certainty. The seconds ticking their way one after the other. The screeching sound.

Lyla was injured on the auto assembly line. The pain was terrible. In its worst form it magnified the sound of steel digging into steel.

“I need something to quiet this noise!”

She felt as if her body was being cut in two. She wanted something to ease the pain.

“This will quite you down. It will make you feel so much better.”

The power washed over her. All the pain was gone. She was in a lull. She sensed all the wonder of the world. Total tranquility.

She immersed herself deeper in these waves. Each time that the pain ripped at her insides, they would give her more of what she needed. After point, they would seem to anticipate her pain. She felt only euphoria. It consumed her being.

When she left the hospital, most of the effects of her accident were gone. She still needed a cane for a few weeks.

“You are completely ready to go. You are as good as new.”

At night, she felt this intense longing. Nothing seemed to satisfy that ache.

“What is wrong with me?”

She took up the cane again as if the effects of the accident remained. But she was as good as new. But she didn’t feel that way.

“As your doctor, I can tell that you are completely cured. You should need the cane.”

But she slouched over and braced herself with the cane. This was quite a shock. She couldn’t work it any other way.”

“I think that I can help you girl.”

Rick had taken a liking to her in the hospital. He worked the late shift.

“I can go anywhere in the hospital that I want.”

He was there to help her out.

“I don’t want to feel this terrible grinding. I hear the trains, and it is tearing me apart.”

She was sure that she needed to move, but Rick helped her out.

She assumed her old self. She ditched the cane. She was as good as new.

“Are we good?” he asked her.

“We are like angels.”

He started to get close. All that she wanted from him were the drugs. But she played up to him as much as she needed. Sometimes, he needed a lot of loving.

“I am starting to fall for you.”

“I am not a very nice girl. Remember that.”

They switched Rick to daytime. And he no longer had his run of the hospital. He could no longer supply Lyla. And she shut him up like a book.

“I really love you, dear.”

“I told you not to love me.”

Lyla stopped loving herself. She was feeling desperate. If Rick wasn’t going to supply her, she was going to have to use other means.

Lyla needed new means.

“You’re not going to find hospital grade on the street.”

“What was she supposed to do. She didn’t want to devote her time to scoring drugs on the street. She tried to feign a respectable life.

“I’m a good woman.”

“We’re all good people. We just get a little better when we get what we need.”

Fitz kept a seat warm at Paradise Pub. He invited Lyla in his circle.

“Come back to my place, and I can light you up.”

“We can talk. That is all.”

“We have lot to talk about. I am an artist.”

Fitz showed her his art. It was mostly haphazard. It gave him an excuse to live this way.

“Some moments I hate myself. But there are moments when I feel like a god.”

She wanted that same exhilaration.

“I want to be an artist.”

When the pain left her body, she understood the meaning of art..

She was back at the beginning. She was helpless. She was depending on this so-called artist. She learned how to criticize. But she couldn’t do any better herself. She was getting caught in the cycle.

“I want the knowledge. I want to soar.”

She watched helplessly as Fitz overdosed. She was all fixed up. She couldn’t escape her cocoon to help. She drifted into somnambulance. When she came to, he was dead on the floor next to her. The art could not save him.

She needed to get out. She needed to put all this behind her. She found Rick.

“I don’t know what happened.”

There were no traces of her visit. She wouldn’t have to go back.

“I can’t help you anymore. Even if I could. I wouldn’t.”

He wanted her to get clean. She was beyond that. He needed to be careful. He knew that she would steal anything that she could. Anything of value.

He used to love her. He didn’t see her that way anymore. He saw her as trouble. He wanted to help. He knew that she was a wild rattlesnake.

The snake slithered around. It couldn’t find its prey. Rick did what he needed to take care. She was going through the worst withdrawal. He tried to help. He used his knowledge from the hospital. She was coming out of her body. She was puking. She was losing her mind.

It went on. He held with her. This was not love. This was necessity.

“I can’t do anything more for you. This is the end of this story.”

He made her enter a program. The way back would be long. She had made the first step.

“I know that feeling. I have never felt it quite that way. But you are in the hospital. And they do things to your body. You come out a little crazy. And you fight to get your life back.”