

In the East

In the East, the sun rose – rather more noisily than I thought necessary. Given the condition I was in, it could, with decency, have made an apologetic appearance around noon. But then, that would never have suited the ebullient Sawyer. He bounded out of his sagging wire bed like a stockbroker who knows that today is indeed his day on the exchange floor. It was the only imagery I could think of at the time without undue thought and therefore suffering.

With the eternal grin of the insane, he grabbed my tin mug, and clashing it against his own insanitary utensil, cried happily
“Uh, Wally, uh ... I'll get yer coffee, huh? Better get it now, huh? Huh? Y'know how y'get all those little bits in it if yer wait for the end? Huh? Huh? OK – here we go.”
And he did, leaving me to my misery.

No matter what he drank, he was always the same. I'd been too scared to try the furniture polish. I was saving it for the really bad times when I had nothing else to drink. I thought of trying it on Sawyer. After all, he'd survived the thinners and water cocktail. Even said it gave him a warm tummy. I remember sitting there watching him, trying to imagine what abdominal tissue damage would look like under bright dissection lights.

I pulled a corner of the scratchy blanket over my face. It was no use. Sunlight streamed through the coarse weave and it was suffocating under there. I sat up and inspected myself for bites. A bloated bedbug ambulated sluggishly towards me across the cracked cement between our beds. I reached for Sawyer's toothbrush to crush it, then instead, picked it up between thumb and forefinger and tossed it back into his grimy bedding to sleep off the excesses of the night. A kindred spirit – as long as it stayed away from me.

Sawyer was back, tongue protruding in concentration, two brimming mugs extended before him and setting each dirty, bare foot down carefully in massive concentration. It was like watching a circus animal performing some newly learned trick.

“Is it Blue Mountain or Mocca Java this morning, Sawyer?” I asked.

“Nah - they – only - had – coffee,” he breathed, spacing his words to match his painful progress, gaze fixed on the two trembling surfaces before him. I crossed my ankles to contain the urge to trip him. Again. Watching him sprawled there apologising, pawing at the large red patches on his chest and leg and apologising had made me feel almost sorry for him. But not for very long.

What actually saved Sawyer and made me resent him even more was his cat. Well, kitten really. More accurately, most of a kitten. I mean, in point of fact, a three legged animal is technically almost 25% not there. Subtract some more for the missing left eye and you have it. An incomplete presence. But its deficiencies were more than compensated for by the disposition of a rabid pit-bull on lysergic acid. Sawyer's kitten was something to be reckoned with. Preferably avoided altogether.

Ever since the day it had slid, in a long, halting succession of claw-screeching, yowling descents, down the inside of the drain-pipe from the roof 3 storeys above, to land at Sawyer's feet, it had attached itself to him. Everyone else nearby in the exercise yard stepped back uncertainly when the noise first began. I remember Sawyer standing there staring upward, spiky head cocked on one side. As the small maimed bundle tumbled out onto the drain grid, he surveyed it with the rapt delight of a new father witnessing the birth of his first born. Down on his knees, his face pressed to the opening he peered eye upwards into the darkness. "Where's the rest of it?" he asked plaintively, his voice echoing strangely in the interior. By way of introduction, the kitten righted itself and scored four parallel furrows across the back of his exposed neck.

Sawyer picked it up and pushed it into his overall top, suffering surprisingly little damage to his hands in the process. Mostly flesh-wounds. The kitten was silent, but then, close contact with Sawyer's rancid flesh would certainly do that to you.

With the others, I watched him scurry off, clutching his front, skirting the more dangerous inmates as usual, but his normally slow and hesitant progress now definitely the gait of a man with a mission. He disappeared back into the south wing.

Lenny Lemkus was not much more gifted than Sawyer and almost as much of a victim. His very few successes in life, apart from remembering to go to the toilet in time, included a couple of clumsy thefts of things from Sawyer. Food stashed away, and squirrel-like, forgotten by Sawyer. An interesting picture from a magazine, usually pets or livestock that struck Sawyer's fancy or something dropped by someone on Visitors' Day. Not that Sawyer had ever received a visitor.

A week later, Lenny approached Sawyer's bed, breathing stertorously through his mouth and holding a malodorous and ragged towel in front of him in what he fondly imagined was a cunning disguise. The kitten was dozing on Sawyer's pillow. It had learned to ignore me if I moved slowly or lay still, and I'd got used to avoiding meeting its monocular gaze. Now, with this new threat approaching,

its single eye blinked wide, the pupil huge and menacing. I slid across my bed, closer to the wall to give Lenny room to entertain me. The next few seconds were confusing. The towel saved Lenny's life, because he was still able to scream as he shambled off down the passage, leaving Sawyer's kitten to demolish the remains of the towel and a large piece of Lenny's right sleeve.

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