

## BOTOX AT WHITMAN-WALKER / A NEW MAN

STEFEN STYRSKY

### Botox at Whitman-Walker

I once went to the Whitman-Walker Clinic with Victor so he could get his Botox injections. The clinic was only a few blocks from his apartment, but he said he wasn't feeling great and didn't think he could make it there on his own. We were friendly that way even though Victor also used to sell me drugs.

He was waiting for me hunched over on the bottom step of his building's stoop, his head down, and his eyes cupped in palms.

"Why does an AIDS clinic give out Botox?" I asked. The name Whitman-Walker made me think of HIV-meds for poor people, the uninsured, the unlucky.

Victor reached out a hand. I pulled him to his feet. He wore a sweat-shirt, and as we walked, I saw that he shivered, his chubby stomach jiggling with each spasm. "It's a healthcare organization," he said. "They do whatever."

At the corner we stopped and waited for the WALK signal. The sun blazed, a reflected star in the windows of the townhouses lining the street. I tilted my head so the rays could warm my face.

"Look at it this way." Victor hugged himself and stamped his sneakers. "I get my wrinkles erased and a mother of three can afford a pediatrician."

I put my hand on his forehead. "I think you have a fever," I said. He jerked away. "I don't have a fever."

The light changed, but we stood there, the timer for the blind counting down the seconds. "Maybe you should go home," I said.

"Are you crazy?" He shoved his hands beneath his armpits. "It'd be a month before I got another appointment."

We kept on. Victor could barely match my pace. When he leaned against a lamppost, I draped the sweatshirt's hood over his head.

"You're really ill," I said.

"I'm withdrawing," he said. "I've been up"—he ticked off fingers—"three days." He gnawed at a cuticle. "I think."

"So take something."

"So take something!" Victor mimicked. "I'm saving what's left for when I get there."

I spun him around by the shoulder. I said, "You're out?"

"Yeah." His eyes were dull pearls.

Your dealer out. I couldn't think of anything worse.

He noticed my expression. "Cut the worrying. Just get me through this."

We were there on a Tuesday, testing day. I knew this because of a sign taped to the front door. A bunch of guys shuffled across the lobby's dusky linoleum, not making eye contact, waiting for instructions. I recognized most of them even though our faults lay exposed in the daylight.

Victor slipped past the crowd and told the receptionist why he was there.

She tapped the keys of her computer. "You don't have an appointment."

"Oh, most certainly I do," Victor said. "I marked it on my calendar with a big, red X."

There was more clicking.

"I really have an appointment," Victor said.

"We all do," she said.

I saw my friend Brian swallowed in the sagging, mint-green cushions of the waiting room couch. His knees were higher than his waist, and his hands hung between his legs. I left Victor arguing with the woman.

At my approach Brian said, "The moment of truth." His face was so open and pale he looked twelve years old. He was more beautiful than I'd ever seen him, a martyr from a Renaissance painting. I didn't think it was fair Brian had this kind of thing looming over him.

"How does it work?" I said.

He handed me a brochure that explained everything. You swiped the inside of your cheek with a testing stick, like sucking on a popsicle, zipped the specimen end into a plastic bag and wrote your assigned number on the outside. The number ensured the test was anonymous.

Some old guy came over and sat next to Brian. His receding hairline made him seem devious. I used to think anyone over twenty-five was practically the grim reaper.

The guy said, "Don't be nervous." He patted Brian's clasped hands. "You won't know the result until Tuesday."

"Great. I get to shit myself the whole week," Brian said.

"Let me tell you my first time." The man looked familiar, but I was sure I'd never seen him before. "Josh and I had the same doctor. I went in for a checkup and my doctor said, 'So, is your relationship open, or more don't ask, don't tell?' And I'm like, Jesus, I guess don't ask, don't tell."

I took the empty cushion, and dust coughed up. I sneezed.

"You weren't asking and he wasn't telling," Brian said, his tone familiar, as if he knew this wandering stranger.

"My doc's like, 'We better draw your blood.' Next thing, I'm sitting there, the nurse strapping my arm with a rubber tube."

"I hear the pills aren't too bad," Brian said.

"They have those names like weird foreign countries," his friend said. "Places you'd never want to visit."

"Crap." Brian was looking at someone across the room. "I slept with that guy's boyfriend." He stood and handed me the testing stick and the ticket with his number. The zipper on Brian's jeans danced in my vision. He went for the exit.

I didn't know who Brian meant. Half the guys in that room had probably taken a tumble with him at some time or another.

"Anyway," the guy continued, sliding over. "What do I think about right then? The last time I got stuck by a needle. A tetanus shot before I went to Guatemala with Josh, the bastard."

The guy didn't have a ticket. Given a moment to consider him, I now saw his eyes were like someone who'd come through a long, restful sleep. He talked. "Our guide took us to a spot where they'd just carved some temples out of the jungle."

A voice called: "Twenty-nine." Brian's number. I wondered if he'd run the swab inside his mouth. I touched the end. It felt dry. I wrapped the ticket around the stick and put everything into my pocket.

"Is that where they filmed *Star Wars*?" I said. "Guatemala?"

"How should I know?" he said.

More numbers were called.

"Temples naked as newborns, the place completely empty." He waved his hands to conjure the vista. "We climbed a pyramid. From a ledge we watched the sun fall behind the mountains. All around was this clearing, totally new."

Sometimes I think I hallucinated the whole thing, that the guy really wasn't there. Kind of like the angel from that movie who talks to the famous actor on the bridge.

I heard Victor singing. "I'm so pretty, I'm so pretty." They must have found his appointment. He was at my side, his face a stretched sheet.

"Smile," I said.

His lips pulled back. He showed me teeth, bright and full.

## A New Man

Then there was this time Donnie and I sold drugs out of the Motel 6 on Georgia Avenue. We didn't mean it to happen, but Donnie was staying there so he could be near his brother, Winchester, who was down the street at Walter Reed after he was shot in Afghanistan.

I was at the window smoking a pipe and watching television. The door opened and Donnie came in on crutches and wearing desert camouflage. I mean, that's what I thought, but it was Donnie's brother. Like brothers, they had a resemblance.

"You scared me," I said. "You should've called."

Donnie was behind his brother. "Your phone is off."

Actually, I'd dropped it in one of those recycling kiosks that pay cash for used phones. The phone was brand new and the machine had spit out three hundred dollars. It was something I didn't remember until now.

"Tell me your name again," Winchester said. He looked good; thinner, but good.

I shook his hand. "Thank you for your service." I'd always wanted to say that.

"Part of my femur is now stainless steel," he said.

"A new man," I said.

Winchester eased himself onto the bed and lay down. "This place is worse than the hospital."

Donnie was gone. I'd been staring out the window and hadn't realized he'd left.

"Where's Donnie?" I said.

"Getting beer," Winchester said. "They don't let us drink at Reed."

But he was right. As hotels go, the Motel 6 on Georgia Avenue was pretty bad. The floors were that thin linoleum you can peel up to expose the concrete. Voices echoed. All the lights were fluorescent tubes so it was like you were in a doctor's office. And they didn't even put free soap and shampoo in the bathroom. Something I was hoping to take when I left.

Donnie returned with two six-packs. We drank.

"How're mom and dad?" Donnie said. I'd heard his parents had been by yesterday to see Winchester, but made sure it was when Donnie wasn't around.

Winchester sniffed. "One of you is smoking."

"That's me," I volunteered. The beer and crystal had put me in a fabulous mood. Zippy and relaxed.

"You know my brother has a real problem, right?" Winchester said.

Donnie cut him off. "I wish everyone was as excited about my sobriety as they are about my relapses."

"How're you even affording this dump?" Winchester said.

"Friend," Donnie said.

Then I remembered what we were doing there. Victor had rented

the room because he thought someone was watching his apartment. He figured a dumpy hotel would throw them off long enough he could sell his current stash.

"Where's Victor?" I said.

Donnie gave me a look like I should be so stupid. "Delivery."

Just then Victor showed up. With him was a kid on roller blades. "What great hallways," the kid said. "If they were longer they'd be awesome."

He was a giant on the skates, his muscular boy-legs like two beanstalks rising into the gentle puffs of his ass. Donnie stared at him. Winchester raised an eyebrow.

"He followed me home," Victor said. "Can I keep him?"

"I'd climb those legs," I said.

All faces spun towards me. Victor said, "That's the first dirty thing I've ever heard you say."

I shrugged. "I'm feeling good."

Winchester was on a mission. He said their mom and dad wanted Donnie back in rehab. I puffed a few more times on the pipe.

"I'm a dealer, and I think you need it," I heard Victor say.

I swallowed a pill and went to the bathroom for a pee. I make faces in the mirror. My expressions shape themselves into those paired laughing and crying masks outside theaters. When I get out, there are two black guys in the room, some fat white guy wearing a T-shirt that is way too tight, and a really cute kid on skates.

The standing black guy says, "Dad was always on my case about the way I should live my life."

"He was worried," says the other black guy, who I notice has a bad leg.

"I'm not joining the Army," the first says. "I'm doing what I want."

The guy closest to me is sitting on the bed. His left foot is strapped into a bulging orthopedic shoe.

I hold out my hand. "Hi, I'm Seth," I say.

He looks at me like I have bad breath, then extends a hand.

The fat guy says, "Dude, you are whacked."

"I feel great," I say.

"No kidding," Donnie said. "You should have heard yourself laughing in the bathroom."

The scene came back together and I recognized everyone. “That’s was amazing,” I said. “I didn’t know any of you.”

Later that night I was wandering the hallways of the Hotel Rouge downtown. The kid on skates flung out a door.

“He filmed me.” He held the door open, yelling back into the room, “I can’t believe he filmed me.” Then he was down the hall, a long straightaway like the one he wanted earlier. Once you’ve found what you’ve always wanted, what do you do next?

I knocked. No one answered. Not even the noise of a TV sounded in the depths.