

Toadstool  
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## Chapter 1: The Toad

No matter how many times Steve had taken the stuff, it had always surprised him. Whether by needle, nose, or pipe, the effect was the same: euphoria. It was as if the drug had returned him to the wild. No longer were the needs for material things, and worldly pleasures. Steve only felt the need to consume, and consume he did.

By the third week, he began to sweat heavily. Juice ran thick from his pores and ran down his skin like molasses. It hung on him like a layer of skin, giving off the same wretched smell of sewage as the stuff itself. The smell would cling to him like a shadow, invading the airways of any place that was graced by his morbid presence. Steve would do what he could to obtain his scourge, in the form of that little, powdered-drug, but when he couldn't, the sweat would suffice. He would scrape goops of it off his skin into little bowls and jars, and collected the nauseous broth only to be consumed later in some form or another. His favorite method was jarring it, and letting it bake in the sun. The gases released after the lid was cracked were immaculate. Steve would stick his face in, and huff at the jars until their effects dwindled and his insatiable hunger returned. They could never starve off the desire. The would jars only prolong his periods without the drug itself, and afterwards he would return to the streets.

However long it took for his family to become concerned, it was far too late. By then, Steve was oblivious with the world around him, and people had become obstacles to his newfound habit. When his parents visited and saw his unkempt apartment complete with heaps of rubbish, grime, and rotting jars, the sight had been all too familiar. Addiction. No stranger to their son. The next step seemed simple, intervention, rehab, and recovery. Wash, rinse, and repeat. They had done it all too many times.

Except they did not expect their son to return to the apartment, drooling from the mouth, with a fat, ugly toad in hand. Steve's mother shrieked when she saw the state of her son; clothes soiled through, thin as a rail, and with great, bulging pupils stretched over the lovely blue eyes that he once had. The mother tried to gather her baby, but there was no stopping Steve from proudly bearing the Toad to his parents, then carrying it to the sink, where he took a mallet and crushed the thing. His eyes lit up as the mushy interior tore through its skin and splattered about. He began mashing the bits together, all while occasionally glancing back at his horrified parents and exclaiming, "I found one. I finally found one!"

Steve's father hugged the despairing mother, and tried his best to shelter her from such an appalling sight. He watched in horror as his poor Steven finished mashing the toad, then brought a straw to his scabbed mouth, and began slurping it up. The awful sound of flesh being sucked through the straw was only drowned out by the sound of sweet, exalted pleasure coming from the son himself. After a large belch, Steve finished his concoction, turned to his parents with a bloody, ragged smile, then collapsed to the floor in a state of bliss. So much for a surprise visit. His mother laid the cookies she had brought for her son on the counter, and sank her knees. His father stood motionless, until the urge to vomit stirred him to run to the bathroom where he added material to the already rank toilet bowl filled with needles and maggots. Flies swarmed about him, yet he could only find the energy to brush the tears from his face. Steven may have more than just a drug problem.

Somewhere, some place in the city, a toad croaked.

## Chapter 2: The Graveyard Shift

Sara sat with her head draped in front a monitor displaying medical records, and a desk full of study materials. A chair next to her squeaked under shifting pressure as Joyce rose from her seat. The heavyset woman snatched up her thermos, turned to Sara, and said, "Alright honey, I'm heading to the bathroom." Sara acknowledged her leave with a nod, and picked up her phone from the counter. The only notification to greet her was a clock displaying 4 :13 AM in grim, grey letters. Not that she didn't expect that. At this hour the hospital was a ghost ship, and the only activity Sara saw outside of the nursing station was the occasional emergency, or the other shifting, zombie-like attendants. There are no windows in this place, no breeze, and no colors. The building, in all its capacity, was a capsule of death. Everything from the dirty food, to the sterile color scheme reeked of faltering mortality. Death hung in the air, and its weight pressed on her shoulders, squeezing the breath from every dull moment in her life. This is your last night-shift Sara, this is your last shift, she thought.

As her mind drifted in and out of despondency, a cold draft tickled her spine, and woke her into a state of alertness. Sara popped out of her seat, and rounded the corner, only to see that Joyce had left the door ajar, and the emergency room exposed to the public. It wasn't her fault, Sara supposed. The door regularly got stuck, and the poor, round woman couldn't reach its rusty hinges. As to why the next set of doors was open, Sara did not have an answer. The automatic doors to the parking lot sat wide apart, letting the chilly autumn air into the building. Sara found herself, once again, thinking that St. Mary's needed to get their shit together. As if working in the emergency department wasn't scary enough, now she had to worry about strangers wandering into the building. Seeing how the security guards were not at their post, Sara did what she could, and unlatched the defective security door, closing it behind her as she retreated into the ER. This is your last shift, she thought, this is your last shift.

4:37 AM. Where was Joyce? She had been known to take long bathroom breaks, but the growing time frame of her absence worried Sara to the point of texting her. The only answer to her inquiry was the vibration of Joyce's phone sitting on the opposite side of the counter. Even more worrying was the fact that Sara had not welcomed a new patient in the better part of an hour. This was unheard of on the graveyard shift. She wished, for the first time at this piss-poor job, that she had an emergency to distract her from these uneasy feelings, but the activity on her floor was as still as the stale air that hung in it. Sara even found herself missing the usual, laborious noises of her bloated coworker.

Stillness. The only sound to console her was the dreary beeping from various medical machines. Things were adding up. The doors were open, Joyce was gone, and so was the security at the ER entrance. Trying her best to console the uneasy thoughts, Sara felt a new determination to avoid any catastrophes on her very last midnight shift. She picked up her phone, and decidedly dialed the number to the front desk. She waited impatiently as the dial tone took ages to chime in her ear until finally, she heard it ring. The sound of a click on the other line shook Sara from her plight, and her face lit up as a voice on the other side said, "Front desk, Michael here."

WHACK! The thunderous noise of steel clashing with concrete tore her attention from the phone. Sara whipped around to see Joyce, wrought with angst, staring down at her thermos which was now streaming hot, crummy hospital-soup all over the ER floor. "Oh, God-damn-it!" Joyce quipped to herself as she gathered her container from the ground. The front desk attendant sounded in Sara's receiver a second time, "Hello?" Sara fumbled with the phone as she regained her composure, and responded, "Hi Michael, can you tell me where the security for the ER entrance is?" The grumbly voice took a labored

breath and responded, "They had to remove an unwanted from the parking lot, so they should be back at their post soon." The simple response didn't exactly ease her nerves, but it would suffice. "Thanks," she said, and hung up the phone. With a glimmer of hope, Sara watched her coworker drudge through what would be a slow cleaning process, and thought that perhaps that something terrible would not be happening on her very last shift in this miserable department.

She was wrong. The doors to the emergency department burst open in a frenzy of confusion, and attendants wheeling a stretcher came crashing into the hallway, trotting through Joyce's soupy mess. Sara sprang from her seat and joined her cohorts as they docked their patient at the nearest available station. A shocked paramedic stared agape at Sara, momentarily speechless. "We called ahead, and no one answered," the man said, "It's an overdose. Unknown substance. His breathing slowed, so we gave him 1 mg of Narcan, but it seems to be regressing again." Nodding, Sara went to find a crash kit, and saw that Joyce had already retrieved one. As Joyce prepared the kit on the side of the bed, Sara retained a closer look at the lifeless body on the cart. A young male around the age of 23 sat limp on the stretcher with bloody, puke-stained rags stretched across his frail frame. Every now and then, he would take a ragged breath and streams of stale blood and snot would drip from his mouth and nose. As a team of doctors assembled, Sara busied herself hooking the patient up to a bag-valve mask. "How's the breathing?" a doctor asked, fumbling with his gloves. "Slowing, and not responding to the naloxone." The EMS said. "Alright, Joyce," the doctor instructed, "let's get the defibrillator ready." Joyce readied the machine, and Sara grasped the kid's messy chin with one shaky hand, then pumped air into his lungs with the other. Her efforts became more labored as the young man's central nervous system gave out, and his lungs relaxed. Sara grasped the cold body even tighter, and squeezed the valve mask with increasing strain, trying not to make eye contact with the boy's dead, dilated pupils. Minutes went on like hours and Sara did her best to ignore the bodily fluids soaking her glove, or the horrid smell wafting off the patient; instead focusing on the slow rise and fall of his ribcage. Joyce began cutting away at the kid's soiled shirt to reveal a torso covered in warts and gangrene; just as ugly as the gunk flowing from his mouth. With each ascent and descent of his necrotic chest, Sara noticed extra movement stemming from his abdomen as it fluttered with tremors underneath every forced breath. Pads from the defibrillator were applied to his ruined body, and before Sara could ascertain what was happening, the boy's vitals began to flatten, and she was being told to step away from a newly deceased carcass.

"CLEAR!" A doctor screamed, and the kid shook under convulsive shock. A small blip of life appeared on the monitors, and then faded into stagnancy. Undeterred, the medical staff readied for another resuscitation. Sara pumped more air into the patient's scabby, blue lips, then stepped back in preparation of another electric charge. The doctor pressed his finger to the button, and nodded to himself with a weird sense of determination. "CLEAR!" He shouted, and sent 300 joules of energy into the patient's heart. The kid's muscles contracted, and his eyes shot open in glaring pain. Beside him, life signs sputtered back onto the monitor.

Waves of agony trembled across his skin, and he writhed across the stretcher, scaring back the attendants. Frozen in place, Sara watched from the corner as the kid clawed at the straps of his valve mask, heaving underneath its foggy plastic. The straps broke free, and he let out a wincing cry, then doubled over; puking up the bloody contents of his stomach. Puke filled with rotting hemoglobin splattered off the floor and onto Sara's Scooby Doo scrubs and padded sneakers. She retreated further, but backed herself into the curtain divider, finding herself unable to escape the awful scene.

After two unsuccessful dry heaves, the kid found relief in his third attempt, and spouted an even larger amount of blood and muck from his body. He growled in deluded pain, then collapsed back into the

stretcher, falling into his previous, lifeless state. The life signs began to diminish once again, yet the staff stood in shock, failing to resume their work, instead, gawking at the mess on the floor. Sara was not scared because the patient was about to die a second time. She had seen that before. She was not scarred of the overdose either, for there had been plenty in her time at the hospital. What scarred her was that in the pool of blood beneath her feet there swam what appeared to be a dozen tadpoles; crawling and sliding through the murky goo with their underdeveloped legs.

Hands grabbed Sara from behind and pulled her away from dying patient and the pool of parasitic, plodding amphibians. A voice asked if she was okay, but as she stared down at her crimson-stained garments, only one thought crossed her mind: This is your last shift Sara. This is your last shift.

### Chapter 3: Clocked Out.

The hospital gave Sara fresh scrubs, but they couldn't replace the lovely Scooby-Doo ones that her fiancé had given her. He hit the nail on that one, seeing as how she loved the show, but their demise had left a void in the form of an unsolved mystery: what the fuck had just happened? With the campy cartoon scrubs in the disposal, there was no gang left to solve the mystery except for Sara herself. However, feeling the labor of her frenzied shift, she left that ugly question unanswered and clocked out. Padding down the hallway in her newly acquired throw-away slippers, she brushed past security and tried to avoid any looks from the inept guardians of her ward. As Sara strolled to her parking spot in the furthest vicinity of the hospital grounds, she flicked through her phone to send her daily text to Jason signaling that she was on her way home. However, Sara's fingers failed to type any sort of message to her cozier fiancé, and a torrent of uneasy thoughts prompted her to close the phone and refrain. Jason was never awake at this time, and the usual check-in would not bring her comfort after the morning's events.

Distressed, Sara fumbled through her endless array of keys, and managed to find the right one. Of course, the recently-defective driver's side door refused to open, so she had to crawl through the passenger's side, crumpling layers of school papers and fast food wrappers as she went. The engine sputtered on and with it came the blast of boisterous talk show hosts, and the scrapping of rusty windshield wipers. With a tired cry, Sara shut off the annoyances, and sank her head onto the steering wheel. Cold air brushed her face from the car's vents and she expelled any of the energy she had left. Why did she choose this profession, she thought? Sara's last night shift was supposed to end with a celebration, but her mind couldn't bridge the endless gap to freedom which took form in her future studies, and her next position at the hospital. She would be back in that emergency ward, but thankfully during the day shift.

After a brief moment of relaxation, Sara's mind snapped back to the sluggish tadpoles she had seen and she jolted her from her stupor. Gazing hazily back at the entrance to the hospital, she thought of the writhing creatures, squirming in their pile of decay, coming from God-knows-where. Sara hadn't the faintest idea of what the hospital would do about what she had seen, but as the entrance gazed back, she knew she had to get away from that building and everything it contained. Without hesitation, she put her decrepit Honda into drive, and veered out of the area as fast as her wheels would allow.

The ride home was as manageable as possible for a dingy October day, and the little rain she encountered hardly made the trip difficult. As per usual with her cruise back from the city, she saw little opposition in the form of other cars, and when she did, their driving was as distracted and dulled as her

own. On drives like these, Sara's focus would lull to the point of relying solely on muscle memory to get home. Her mind bounced from thought to thought; stuck in a whirly daze as thick as the fog that enveloped the road, and her attention would only return when oncoming headlights pierced the confines of her vehicle. After some scratches and disruptions, a dull static replaced the morning jazz on her speakers as she escaped the public station's range and furthered her distance away from the city. Sputtering into a warm crackle, the humming volume of the airways, coupled with the roaming stretch of road, coaxed Sara into a renewed stupor and she sagged into the seats with increasing lethargy. The crumpling Michigan roads plodded at her tires, and vibrated throughout the vehicle, joining in with the perpetual white noise which reverberated throughout the cabin. Sara's eyelids sank in conjunction with her posture, and she lost functionality by the minute. Thinking back to her cuddly fiancé, and the ecstasy of a warm bed, she became content with closing her eyes, just for a second. She didn't seem concerned. However much time she had closed them, she was unaware, but it seemed nothing more than a flash. The tearing sound of road strips clawed Sara from her REM state, and was followed closely by the roaring sound of an egregious truck horn. Shaken, Sara looked up to find that her car had begun drifting off the shoulder of the road, and a large truck was bearing down behind her. The frigid Sara corrected her vehicle's path in a panicked fashion and let the vindictive driver pass her. Wind shook her car as it brushed past, and the driver doubled down with another punch on his horn as he drove into the distance.

After the weight of the incident settled onto Sara's already heavy situation, she knew that she needed to get off the road and rest. The poor girl decided to stop, and pulled into a nearby park which she recognized from attending an old friend's birthday party. It was a small, murky lake which held grounds to a rusty playground, and a saggy pavilion for events. Crushing leaves as she went, she crossed the run-down parking lot, and came to a stop at closet point to the lake, where she gleamed at the heaps of lofty steam rolling off the water. She shut the engine off, reclined her seat, and closed her eyes. Opting to leave her keys in the ignition, the radio continued to produce soothing static throughout the cabin. The strain throughout Sara's body faded with every second, and she found herself face to face with peace for the first time in her day. Finally catching sleep, darkness consumed her consciousness, and she drifted away.

Sara woke to a sound. Something ugly. The sound of a warbling pit with gurgles and belches perforating the air in every direction. Sara popped her seat to the upright position, rubbed the exhaustion from her eyes, and noticed that her car's battery had shut off to preserve its juice. In doing so, it had wrought her of the drowning white noise her relaxation had relied upon, and in its wake, was a horrible torrent of organic groaning, moaning, and croaks which coarsely vibrated throughout the atmosphere around her. The sounds hit Sara like a wall when she realized what produced them. They were frogs. The God awful animals had infected the wilderness and smothered the night with their belching, croaking tunes. "Nope, nope, nope," Sara stuttered to herself, "Not today, nuh, ugh." She frantically started her engine, and peeled the car out of the lot towards her home.

The rest of her journey went by fast, and Sara made it home safe with an alertness brought on by the bestial scare. She came home to a dark apartment, and a rising sun. The clinking of her keys alerted her dog, and as the door cracked open, she was already being greeted by the ecstatic Pitbull. Seeking a little affection, she reached down, and tried for a hug. "Hello, Molly," she quipped, but the dog retreated from her arms, and ran towards the food bowl. As usual, the dim-witted thing refused socialize on an empty stomach. Sara threw her bag to the floor and fed Molly before making herself a bowl of cereal. She shuffled into the bedroom, being careful not to wake Jason, and changed out of her used hospital garments. Sara settled into a small spot on the bed beside her sprawled, snoring fiancé, and curled into

a ball with the comfort of what little sheets she could grab. Thoughts came and went, but sleep struggled to find its mark. Sara reflected on the incident from earlier that day, and she found herself frozen with panic to the point where she couldn't blink and was stuck staring off into the darkness of her value-sized bedroom. Why did she choose this field? Why didn't she do something easier? And what the fuck had just happened? Why? Why? Why? Rays of sunshine crept through the cracks in her blinds, and Sara resigned to her need for sleep. Turning her shoulder, she latched onto her fiancé's arm, and cuddled up against his warm skin. He murmured in his sleep, and eventually, his easy breathing lulled Sara's own, to the point which she finally achieved rest.

Strangely, grand dreams of adventures during the summertime occupied her sleep. Sara found herself lost in a dream chasing her dog Molly through the wake on a beach somewhere with Jason watching from the shore. The dog happily splashed about, and ran between her and her fiancé as they threw her toy ball back and forth. She felt at peace. No worry, no trouble. Just her man, and her dog. The afternoon came, and Sara woke to an empty bed. She instinctively reached beside her, but found nothing but cold, empty sheets. Jason had left for work hours ago, and being considerate per usual, he did not wake her from her slumber. Sara ached for him. Opposite work schedules had caused a rift between them which was only bridged between the hours of 6 PM to 10PM, and it was horrible. She whistled for her dog, but received no answer. Sara had homework to do today, but in her current condition, she was not capable of focusing on anything besides her own misery. She wrapped the comforter between her legs, and clinched them with the shaky grip of anxiety. Alone, and tucked away in her bed, Sara began to weep. Her faint sobbing could be heard through the paper-thin walls.