Mr Sweetly

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I met my best friend (line break after comma),  
Jason, in our freshman year at a boys' high school in **New York**. Jason was the kind of guy that all the other guys looked up to. Tougher-than-tough, but also willing to give you the shirt off his back. He was one of the star athletes on the **football** team, all the girls went nuts over him, and, to top it all off, he always did really well in class. I don't think I ever saw him get anything lower than a B- in all four years of high school.

**Jason** had it all. He seemed untouchable; fearless, even... Which is why I always found his dread of the school bathroom to be really odd. He would approach the door with child-like trepidation and only go in if myself or another friend were with him, or if he heard people inside.

The times that I had gone in with him, I witnessed him perform a ritual of pushing all of the stall doors open and looking in, even if he was only going to use the urinal. When a stall door was shut, he would knock on it three times and wait for a response. Occasionally, if a stall was out of order or he received no response from behind a closed **door**, he would pull himself up on the door to look inside.

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Paragraph before pome.

*He smiles sweetly; what a doll!  
He watches you from his stall,  
Don't be rude; don't call him creepy!  
Call him by the name of Mr. Sweetly!  
He loved the children of this school.  
Yes! To think otherwise, you'd be a fool!  
And though he did act most discreetly,  
They found him out, poor Mr. Sweetly!*

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*They called him a "peeping tom,"  
Though he insisted he did no wrong!  
But a parent sliced his face so neatly  
Giving him a toothy grin; oh, Mr. Sweetly...  
So he lurks now forever*

*\*\*\**

*In his stall and endeavors  
To rattle you to your core completely.  
He's watching you now, that Mr. Sweetly!*

"All that stuff with the stalls. Why do you do it?”

Jason gave me a grave look as he shook his head. "Let it go," was all he said.

I did let it go for a long time after that. It had slipped my mind almost completely, having seen it happen so often that it was commonplace for me, as well. However, one day, when I went in to do my business, I saw three of the other boys in our year do exactly what Jason always did. Jamal, Sam, and Pete were pushing the stalls open, then shaking their heads at each other. At first, I was a little mad. I thought that, perhaps, they had seen Jason do this before and were making fun of him. I couldn't understand why, though. They had always been pretty cool guys. But then I realized that they weren't laughing. They were being pretty serious as they completed their task. They also said "hello" to me as though nothing were out of the ordinary when they finally realized that I was there.

What I had seen bothered me. I couldn't explain why, but it made me feel uneasy. That feeling was only exacerbated by the fact that I knew that Jason wouldn't tell me what was going on. And I didn't feel I knew those guys well enough to ask them. It was clearly a source of discomfort for Jason and I assumed it might be for them, too.

One day, however, in our sophomore year, Jason and I stopped by the bathroom on our way to lunch. Jamal was in there washing his hands as we walked in. We said "hi," and Jason went to begin checking the stalls. Jamal stopped him, though, and said, "You're good, man."

"Nothing?" Jason asked.

"Nah. You're good. Take it easy," Jamal replied and walked out.

I waited a few seconds after the door closed completely behind Jamal to say anything.

"OK, what is this about?”

Jason looked at me in confusion at first, but then his eyebrows narrowed. "I thought I told you to let it go.”

"You did, but I'm a little bit creeped out, dude! When it was just you, I thought that maybe it was some kind of quirk, but there are three other people I saw doing that. What is going on? Did you guys witness something in here? What are—“

"I SAID, 'LET IT GO!'" Jason yelled. I was startled by that and jumped slightly. He was always pretty easy-going, and I had never seen him get that mad within the two years that I had known him by that point.

"I... I'm sorry, dude," I said, rather meekly.

Jason seemed flustered, almost like he was shocked that he yelled, himself. "Don't worry about it, buddy. I'm sorry for yelling at you. Just..." He sighed really deeply. "Just please don't bring it up again, OK?”

I promised him that I wouldn't. For years, I kept that promise. Life went back to normal. Years went by and we grew up. Well, we got a little older, anyway. And a few years after we graduated, I became an uncle. Everything was fine.

I had stopped thinking about Jason's bathroom ritual altogether. That is, until the beginning of this month. I was babysitting my nephew, who is now six-years-old, and I took him to the mall so we could spend the whole day just walking around. Before we left, I told him he'd have to use the bathroom. We went in and, other than the one guy who was leaving as we walked in, it was empty in there. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and took a moment to fix my hair when I heard the sound of stall doors banging. I looked over to my nephew and saw that he was doing exactly what Jason had always done. He even looked under the door of a stall that had an "Out of Order" sign taped to it. Again, I couldn't tell you why, but it sent a chill up my spine. It felt like something was really wrong. I decided not to say anything at that moment, but I knew I had to ask him. When we were in the car heading back to his house, that's exactly what I did.

"Hey, Billy, I need to ask you something, OK? And I need you to tell me the truth." He nodded his head and I continued. "Why do you open the bathroom stalls like that?" We pulled up to a red light and I looked at him in the rear-view mirror.

Billy slouched in his seat a bit. He looked up at me with fearful eyes. Just as I was sure that he wasn't going to tell me anything, he said, "Mr. Sweetly." His voice was quiet and almost shaky, but I heard him just fine.

"What about Mr. Sweetly? Who is that, buddy? How do you know him? Does he work at your school?" As soon as I asked that last question, I was struck with a realization that I was surprised had never dawned on me before; Jason, Jamal, Sam, and Pete all came from the same grade school. The very grade school that my nephew, Billy, currently attends. That had to be it. "Billy, did he hurt you? Who is he?”

Billy just pursed his lips and shook his head. I decided not to press the issue with him any further, not wanting to cause him any more distress than he was clearly already in. When I dropped him off, however, I pulled my sister over to the side to speak to her. I asked her if there was someone who worked at Billy's school named Sweetly. She, an active member of the PTA who knows everyone at that school, told me that there wasn't. She also said that no parent or child had that name, either. When I told her about Billy's behavior, she laughed it off and told me that the kids had been making up scary stories since Halloween is coming up, and one of them probably scared him. I didn't believe that that was the case, but I didn't tell her that. Before I said anything else, I knew I had to meet with Jason.

Last Saturday, Jason and I went out to lunch. After a while, I finally said, "Jason, I have something important to ask you. And I need you to tell me the truth.”

"Yeah, man. What is it?”

I breathed in deep. I was kind of afraid of what his reaction would be. But I had to protect my nephew, even if that meant causing a scene or potentially losing my friend. I'm sorry, but Billy is the most important thing in the world to me. And so, I asked, "Who is Mr. Sweetly?”

Jason didn't yell. He didn't even move initially. The blood drained from his face and he slowly looked up at me. "Where the fuck did you hear that name?”

"Just answer me, Jay. Who is he?”

Jason told me the whole story, finally, after all these years. And now I almost wish that I didn't know.

According to the legend, in the 1950's, there was a man who worked at the school. His name was Melvin Myrtle, and he was the school's janitor. Often seen wearing a bowler hat and a suit, playing ragtime records from a record player he had in the janitor's closet, he was a goofy sort of man that everyone in the school loved. He was particularly good with children and people often wondered why he and his wife had never had children of their own before she tragically died. They started calling him "Mr. Sweetly" because he always smiled sweetly at everyone who passed by. One day, however, the school's other janitor, a father of a boy at the school, walked into the boy's room on the first floor to clean it. When he stepped inside, he saw Myrtle peeking over the wall of one of the stalls into the next one. The man became infuriated and forcibly yanked Myrtle from the stall. A long process of asking the children painful questions began, and it was determined that he did, in fact, have a habit of peering at children in the bathroom. Several girls stated that they had caught him peeping at them or their friends, but the kids he seemed to prefer were primarily boys. After the findings, Myrtle went missing and was never heard from again. Though the other janitor was suspected of foul play, eventually, the charges were dropped.

A couple of years later, a boy bolted from the bathroom, screaming his head off that there was a "man missing half of his face" in there, watching him. Of course, a search yielded nothing. He gave a description of the man, and several other boys claimed to have seen him, too. He would slowly poke his head up over a stall, and either watch them at the urinal or in the stall next to his. He was wearing a bowler hat, and he was missing his lips and a large portion of flesh from one of his cheeks. The boy concluded his story with, "I could almost swear he really was smiling.”

Jason told me that, since no evidence could ever be found, teachers just began to think that it was a story that the boys kept passing down to each other, starting with boys who were around when the Myrtle incident took place. So, with no help from any of the adults, the boys started trying to find ways to ward him off. After a while, they discovered that he doesn't appear if you look for him first, starting with his stall.

"The last stall to the right. That's where he was caught. That's his favorite place. That's where I first saw him," Jason concluded. He was shaking, rubbing his forearms in discomfort, eyes never leaving a spot on the table throughout the entire story. I felt so badly for him. He looked like a terrified child. I believed his story a million percent because, well, why would he lie? How could he sell this story so well if he had never experienced it? Then he looked up at me and asked again, "Where did you hear that name?”

I told him about how I had seen my nephew do what he had always done in high school, and how Billy told me that name after I asked why he checked the stalls.

"Jesus Christ, Jimmy! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

"I didn't know, dude! Fuck!" I paused. "You need to tell my sister this story. She has to transfer Billy to another school." I paused again. "Wait, will that even help? You kept checking the stalls in high school. You still do that! Does he follow you?”

Jason shook his head. "As far as I know, he doesn't. But that kind of shit sticks with you, man. I'm gonna be doing that for the rest of my life." He huffed and scratched his head. "I know your sister. Do you think she's going to listen to a ghost story and just pull her son out of that place based on that? She's a part of the fabric of that school. You need some kind of proof.”

Jason then told me about a rumor that there was something written on one of the walls in Sweetly's Stall (as the kids started calling it), and that it was covered up by the administration. The rumor was that it appeared one day, sometime in the 80's, and it was plastered over. A few days later, the plaster was entirely gone and the writing was perfectly legible again. After that, they moved the toilet paper dispenser over to that side and bolted it over the writing. When I asked Jason what it said, he told me that he wasn't sure. "Nobody's ever been brave enough to try to find out.”

We agreed that day that we would each call out sick and take Billy to school on Monday. Jason would pretend that he was just visiting for the nostalgia, since some of his old teachers were still there, and we would stop in the bathroom before we left. We did just that. But we both froze in front of the bathroom door.

"Are you OK, dude?" I asked. Jason only nodded. "Hey, uh, before we go in," I continued, "what happens if I see him?”

Jason shook his head and said, "You won't. If you've never seen him before as a kid, he won't appear to you as an adult. That's part of the reason why none of the teachers ever believed us.”

We took deep breaths and walked in. Jason checked all the stalls and I stepped into Sweetly's. I managed to pry the lid off of the toilet paper dispenser and I unscrewed it (with a degree of difficulty) from the wall with the mini slot screwdriver I had in my pocket. Jason couldn't even go near the stall after checking to make sure that it was empty, so it was all up to me. I pulled the dispenser from the wall and looked. There was, indeed, writing. Someone —or something— had etched a poem into the wall. As I read it, I could swear that I heard the faint sound of ragtime music coming from the air vent. The air also seemed to get a little colder. Jason sensed that something was wrong, as well. He started frantically telling me to hurry. I tried to take a picture of the poem with my phone. The screen flashed, the phone glitched, and then it just stopped working. It hasn't worked since and I had to replace it.

I wound up jotting it down on my arm very quickly and I haphazardly replaced the dispenser because I wanted to get the fuck out of there. This is the poem that was on the wall:

*He smiles sweetly; what a doll!  
He watches you from his stall,  
Don't be rude; don't call him creepy!  
Call him by the name of Mr. Sweetly!  
He loved the children of this school.  
Yes! To think otherwise, you'd be a fool!  
And though he did act most discreetly,  
They found him out, poor Mr. Sweetly!  
They called him a "peeping tom,"  
Though he insisted he did no wrong!  
But a parent sliced his face so neatly  
Giving him a toothy grin; oh, Mr. Sweetly...  
So he lurks now forever  
In his stall and endeavors  
To rattle you to your core completely.  
He's watching you now, that Mr. Sweetly!*

Jason and I are planning to speak to my sister this weekend. We hope that, armed with the poem, my dead phone, and Jason's experience, we can convince her to put Billy in another school.

One more thing: I've been hearing the ragtime music in every public bathroom since reading that poem. If I'm alone in there, the air feels cold and I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched.

Despite what Jason said, I think Mr. Sweetly followed me. I may not be able to see him, but I can feel him just fine. And I can swear that he really is smiling.