

On Cloudless Days

By Oliver Swinford

"Lord, help my poor soul" – Edgar Allan Poe

*For my family. For without them, I would not be the person I am today, and
would not be able to write this....*

CHAPTER 1

You're going to die. You're going to die October 15th, 2015. Three bullets will riddle through your body until you're nothing but a black bag. The third bullet will be the one that kills you. It will go straight through your forehead and out the back of your skull. It wasn't your fault though. You just made a mistake, and now that mistake is breathing the air that you once loved. Life is funny like that.

CHAPTER 2

I'm sitting outside of the library, beside the big window that birds smash into and then fly away. Only the lucky birds fly away. It's like a bird graveyard along that wall. They should put curtains up, or a picture of hawk; something to make them rethink their flying choices.

"There you are. I've been looking all over for you." Patrick says and he sits down beside me, unlit cigarette in his mouth.

"I've been sitting here, admiring the view." I turn around and look at the window.

"How many have flown into it since you got here?"

"Five."

"How many of them flew away?"

"Four."

"Sad story." He lights his cigarette and doesn't inhale and the smoke rolls out of his nose.

Patrick's a good friend. When I say he's a good friend, I mean Patrick would take a bullet for me, even if I was a terrorist and had taken people hostage. That's how much he cares and how forgiving he

is. In tenth grade, I slept with his girlfriend when we were both drunk, and even though he was pissed, he never yelled at me, or cursed, or even went off. He just let that be that, and broke up with her. Never called her names, never got mad at her either. Just, let it go.

“I’m beginning to dislike this campus more and more.” I say.

“Yeah, I’m right there with you. It’s like every year it keeps getting worse. But maybe that’s how it’s supposed to be? Like we’ve overstayed our welcome.”

“I’ll say I’ve overstayed my welcome when they’re done sucking money out of my account.”

“I’m right there with you.”

Patrick takes a long drag and looks up at the sky, then looks at me.

“So I ran into Ashley earlier.” Patrick says.

“Who’s Ashley?”

“The blonde girl you met at John’s party last week. The one who gave you her phone number. The one who couldn’t keep her eyes off of you.”

“What’d she have to say?”

“Wanted to know why you hadn’t texted her yet.”

“What’d you tell her?”

“Told her your phone was broken.”

“Good cover.”

“She asked how I got in contact with you, and I told her smoke signals.” He says, as he blows out two puffs of smoke. ‘You really do need to get out there and find someone. She was cute too.”

“She wasn’t my type.”

“What is your type? Short, brunette girl? Half Asian, half Portuguese with an eye patch and a stutter?”

“No. She can be tall.” He laughs and puts the cigarette down.

“Seriously though. You need to find someone. You’ve been single for five months now. It’s time you got back in the flow of things. Start fucking drunk girls at parties who can’t remember their own names.”

“I’ve been single for four months.”

“The fact that you’ve been counting shows that you want back in.”

“That fact that you’ve been counting shows that you have an obsession with my love life.” I say.

“Just because Jessica cheated on you doesn’t mean the next one will. You can’t put everyone into that category. Look at me and Sarah. We’ve been dating for three years now. There were some shit girlfriends before her, but look what I have now. It all pays off eventually.”

“See, you’re the settling type though. You’re the type of guy who wants a long lasting relationship. The type of guy who can put up with the bullshit if it doesn’t matter in the long run. It’s something I just can’t do.”

“Well, then I don’t know what the to tell you. Either start fucking around, dating around, whatever, or be stuck in this rut for the rest of your life, thinking about Jessica and her five other boyfriends.” He stands up and throws down his cigarette and I stomp on it, before he can.

“I’ll be okay. Just give me some more time.” We start walking down the sidewalk, passing by freshmen running to class with their backpacks flapping in the wind.

“Do you ever think Jessica feels guilty?” I say.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you ever think she feels bad for cheating on me. Like, do you think she ever just wants to call and say she’s sorry ‘Please forgive me? I was a fool for cheating on you. I apologize, from the bottom of my heart. Could you ever excuse my cunt-like behavior?’ He snorts when he laughs, then starts to cough.

“I don’t think you’re going to get it out of her. Unless the boyfriend she cheated on you with ends up cheating on her. But knowing Jessica, I’d say she’s already cheating on him. So, in all honesty, no, I don’t think she feels bad. That’s how the world works though. That’s how people live. That’s the person who goes to sleep at night and sleeps for hours. The person who has no regrets, or no morals, and they don’t see where they’ve done anything wrong.”

“Fuckers.” I say.

“Yep.”

We stop walking and get to a coffee shop that looks exactly like a crack den, but it’s got the “best coffee in town” according to Patrick. I tell him I don’t really give a shit, and that I put enough creamer in my coffee to make it taste more like creamer than coffee. We go inside and it’s dark, but

crowded. The music is blasting as loud as it possibly can, so there's no way you can distinguish the difference between voices and music. There are a ton of kids, all sitting at booths, dressed like they just got out of a time machine that puts them in the ugliest possible clothing. There are a couple of people by themselves in the big chairs, reading, but I don't know how they can read with the music being as loud as it is. I like to think that they're not actually reading. That they're just sitting down with a book in front of them to look cool. Maybe one day I'll catch one of them with their book upside down.

"Hi, can I take your order?" The cashier says to Patrick, and Patrick pauses for a moment, forgetting that there's a gigantic menu behind the counter.

"Can I just get a large, dark roast, no cream or sugar?"

"That'll be \$2.46." He pulls out his wallet, hands her the card, she swipes it and then prints out a receipt that he has to sign, but he just scribbles what looks like hieroglyphics.

"I like your shirt! Where'd you get it?" She says to me, very flirtatious, and Patrick nudges me with his elbow.

"I got it from a homeless guy. He was selling them for a buck a piece. It still has the smell of cheap soup on it." She stops smiling and asks me what I want. I tell her a medium white chocolate mocha, hand her a five and tell her to keep the change.

"Smooth." Patrick says as he sips his coffee.

"She has a lazy eye. I wasn't sure who the compliment was for." I pick up my coffee, which is probably three quarters coffee and one quarter spit.

We sit down at a booth and the people behind us are whispering something about either me or Patrick. We can't tell which one. They're all young sorority girls. Probably just came from buying their first, but not last, morning after pill.

"Can you make out a goddamn word any of them are saying?" Patrick leans in and whispers to me.

"I'm pretty sure I heard weird, and retarded spliced in there. But who knows? They might just be talking about each other."

This is the thing I hate about coffee shops and will always hate about them. Your conversation, no matter how important it is, is never as important as the conversation beside you. So, if you're talking loud enough to where someone can hear you, chances are they're soon to be screaming about somebody that they ran into last week, and your conversation drifts away into nothingness.

"So me and Sarah are going up to the mountains this weekend if you'd want to come along." I shrug and look at my coffee.

"No, you guys go. I'd play third wheel and ruin every romantic moment you two would have."

"Do you think we'd end up pushing you off the mountain?"

"Either that or I jump."

One of the girls that were sitting behind us gets up and walks to the bathroom, and another one of her friends follow. They're wearing grey sweat pants and have the college logo basically tattooed on their skin with how many logos they have on. They're walking advertisements.

"Do you ever get the feeling that God ran out of ideas on how to make women, so he re-used a copy of some dumb one and just made a million of them?" I say.

“Yeah, I get that feeling a lot. It’s like having déjà vu mixed with gonorrhea.”

“It’s a shame. When did they stop making girls with personalities?”

“I think it was around the time they stopped telling women to smoke during pregnancy.”

We hear a bit of tossing and turning in the booth behind us, and then a brown haired girl whose face is covered so thick in foundation that she might be a clown, pops her head up and looks straight at me, and Patrick turns his head around, and then turns back to me with a sour look on his face.

“Who are you assholes talking about?”

“Which part of the conversation did you hear?” Patrick turns and says to her.

“The part about girls not having personalities.”

“Oh, that was just about some friends of ours. You might know them actually. They’re in your sorority. In fact, you might just be one of them. I start to lose track of who’s who.” I say, smiling as I say it.

“Fuck you, you small dicked fuckers.” She yells, but nobody in the coffee shop notices because of how loud the music is.

“No need to shout. You might have some type of airborne STD that hasn’t been discovered yet. I don’t want that getting in my coffee” Patrick says, and when he finishes, he picks up his coffee to take a sip only to have the brunette smack it out of his hands, where it lands on the table and spills everywhere.

Patrick gets up, the girl not realizing that he’s 6’4, and a giant compared to all of them, and most of the guys in the coffee shop.

“Now hold on just a moment. You got coffee all over my table. Think you could come clean it up?” At this point, I’m laughing so hard I don’t notice the girls from the bathroom coming back.

“What’s going on here?” The shorter, blonder and slightly more attractive of the two says, with a very concerned look on her face, like she’s the deputy of the coffee shop.

“Nothing, mam. I was just asking your friend to clean up the coffee she spilled on our table.” Patrick bows a little, and I’m still laughing, but not loud enough to give up his act.

“Meredith, why did you spill this guy’s coffee?”

“He was being an asshole.” She says, her eyes getting kind of watered up, about to do some fake crying to pull sympathy from her friend.

“Then I think you kind of deserved it” the short blonde says, shrugging her shoulders.

The rest of the girls from the booth get up and are all standing beside each other, except the brunette, who is still fake crying in her corner behind Patrick. The cashier with the lazy eye comes over and is looking at all of us, because no one is talking.

“What happened?” she says with the biggest look of confusion on her face.

“These assholes were making fun of my friends.” The blonde says, and as much as I want to punch her in the throat, I know that no matter what we say, no matter what we do, that all of the friends will lie to back up the blonde girl’s story.

“I must apologize” I stand up. “It will never happen again. My friend Patrick here’s Grandmother just died today, so he’s just working through the stages. Now, I’m sure we can all just work through this and forgive each other.”

The cashier looks at the blonde girl, and back at me, and then pulls a towel from her apron and starts wiping up the coffee.

“Poor, Grandma.” Patrick starts fake crying to mock the brunette. “She never saw that dump truck coming.”

“It’s going to be okay, buddy. Let’s get you out of here.” I pat him on the back and we make our way to the door, when one of the girls tries to trip me up, and I skip my leg over it.

CHAPTER 3

The start of a new semester brings the worst kind of people, because they’re all still in high school mode. They have no idea how to function in a place like this, so they resort to being fake to fit in, and then either end up becoming that person or remaining in freshmen limbo, where they drink their brain away and end up behind a desk from twenty three to sixty three, because they don’t know how to think for themselves.

I pass by one of the dorm rooms where kids are outside smoking, asking anyone walking by if they can bum a cigarette off of them, or if they have a light, which really makes you wonder why they would buy or have cigarettes without the means of lighting them.

“So, man, like does anyone want to come up and smoke tonight? I’ve got an ounce from a friend and it’s pretty good.” Some kid with a Bob Marley shirt says to a group of people sitting down around him as I wait for the walking sign.

“Yeah, that sounds excellent. Is it cool if I bring a couple of girls?” One of the guys says.

“Of course. The more the merrier. Just as long as they don’t have boyfriends.”

“Nah, they just got here.”

They had to leave their boyfriends behind. Those poor boyfriends of freshmen girls. It's a good thing I never dated in high school. I just slept around. There were girls that I liked, but they didn't like me, except when they were drunk, and then they seemed to like me just fine. Which means, they were either lying about not liking me, or their standards lowered significantly enough to the point of fucking someone they didn't like when they were drunk. That's basically what I've done all throughout college. Just...fucked around. Girls at parties, girls in class, girls whose names I can't remember for the life of me.

So now, as Patrick so delightfully put it, I'm not seeing anyone or anything. I'm not fucking random girls or going on dates. I'm just going to class and hanging out with friends, which for some reason seems more satisfying than having a girlfriend.

I walk into this diner where I'm supposed to meet Patrick and Sarah for lunch, but realize that I can't find them, and there are a shit ton of people sitting down, eating or talking, and a shit ton is just a few too many for me to walk through and look at each table.

"Hey!" I look and see Sarah yelling at me from a booth in the corner.

"Hey, sorry. I didn't know where you guys were at."

"It's okay, we just got here five seconds before you did." Patrick says.

"Why do you have a jacket on? It's not that cold outside." Sarah is in a t-shirt and skirt.

"Because I get cold super easy. Why don't you have a jacket on?"

"Because it's like seventy five degrees outside."

"Well, when a cold chill blows through, I'll be the one laughing. Has our waitress stopped by yet?" I ask, looking at the menu, at which I could point to anything, order it, eat it, and enjoy it, because I'm just that hungry.

“Not yet.” Patrick says. “But she’ll be by in a minute. As you can see, we aren’t her only customers.”

“Well, she needs to hurry up and get over here before I end up eating the sugar packets.” I laugh and they do too, and we all go studying the menus.

“So, why aren’t you coming with us this weekend?” Sarah flicks her finger at the back of my menu.

“What about this weekend?”

“Patrick invited you to come with us and you said you didn’t want to because you were afraid of feeling like a third wheel.” Patrick nods.

“Oh yeah. That. I don’t want to intrude.”

“Oh my god, if we were worried about you intruding, we wouldn’t have invited you, dipshit.” I start to scratch at my neck, to pretend like I might have something else going on.

“Why don’t you two just go together? Have it be a weekend for just the two of you.”

“Because, there’s no point in going up there if it’s just the two of us. We already have our fair share of weekends together.”

“Why don’t you have another one? Besides, my friend Kate already invited me to a party on Saturday. Why don’t you two just come along with me there? It’ll be more fun than sitting in a cabin for three days.” Sarah pouts.

“You never do anything that we want to do.”

“That’s the biggest lie I’ve ever heard in my life. You guys drag me along everywhere. Like to that boring folk festival last month. That was terrible. I wanted to strangle you and Patrick.”

“Don’t strangle me over it. I didn’t want to go just as much as you did.” Patrick says, looking at Sarah who is shooting him death glares.

“Okay then, fuck it. We’ll just go to the party and waste our lives away. I was going to invite my friend Molly to come up with us too. But never mind that.”

“Your friend Molly that’s in the sorority?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank God. She’s dumb as fuck. That’s like being stuck with a robot that only knows how to giggle and tell shitty stories about her sorority life.” I say.

“Shut up! She’s nice.”

“She’s got a nice body. That’s about it.”

Our waitress arrives at the table, and she’s a pretty large woman. Larger than the rest of the waitresses. On top of that, she’s sweating like a pig, so I trust that she’s had a taste of everything on the menu.

“Sorry to keep you folks waiting, one of the waitresses didn’t show up, so I had to pick up her section. So now I’m running like eighteen tables.” She brushes the sweat off her forehead with her arm.

“It’s no problem. In fact, we already know what we want, so it’ll save you a trip back and forth to the computer.” Patrick says, in a very understanding tone. Typical Patrick. If she had been an hour late to our table he would’ve said the same thing.

“I’ll have a Coke and a cheeseburger. Medium, with no lettuce or tomato.” Sarah says and hands her menu to Patrick.

“I’ll have a Dr. Pepper and a bacon cheeseburger, medium rare, with no tomato.” Patrick says, and hands the two menus to the waitress.

“I’ll have a Coke and whatever the fuck you decide is best off the menu.” I hand her mine, and she snorts.

“I’ll be back with the drinks in a moment.” She scurries away, and I can almost see a trail of sweat behind her.

The diner is still full, and people are still waiting to be sat. Families of the freshmen, more than likely. They look like it anyway. They all have on school t shirts, and look like they’re going to regret eating after spending a good portion of their money on tuition for these investments they’ve created. Lucky for me, my parents died when I was ten, and left a ton of cash for me, so I never had to worry about my tuition or anything else for that matter. I lived with my grandparents after they died, and my grandparents ended up letting me live above their garage in an apartment they had built. They let me use the money however I saw fit, whether it be buying a car, or anything else I wanted. They set aside the money for college for me though and told me that my parents would’ve wanted me to go. I ended up not spending a lot of it. Ten percent of it, maybe, if I’m quoting my grandpa correctly. He said he was proud of me. I said I was sad that I didn’t spend more of it. That makes me sound ungrateful, but in all honesty, there was nothing that I really wanted growing up. I never wanted toys, or all of the other wastes of money that kids seem to embrace. All I wanted was a place to sleep at night, and they gave me that and I was grateful.

Patrick is the only one who knows how my parents died. He's the only person I've told outside of my therapist. He's the only one I could trust to keep his mouth shut. I gave him the go ahead to tell Sarah one day, though, after she'd continually asked questions about my past with Patrick to where both he and I had had enough of it. If Sarah had asked now, I would've told her, seeing as how close we've become. I have no doubt that Sarah and Patrick will get married. But when Sarah found out, she literally called me crying, saying she was so sorry, and that if I ever needed to talk to anyone about it, that she was there for me. I said thanks, that I was okay, and that I had to go, so I hung up and went back to eating. It isn't that big of a deal.

They were both on vacation in England while I was at camp for the summer. They were mugged the second day they were there, but luckily, my dad only gave the mugger a little bit of the cash they had. Then, to make matters worse, the car they had rented broke down on the highway about an hour away from their apartment. A man had stopped to help them, seeing as they didn't know what to do, and he shot both of them and put them in the trunk of his car, and got about fifteen miles away before a cop had pulled him over for a broken taillight. At which point, he tried to shoot the cop, only to realize too late that cops kind of expect that sort of shit to happen, and he was shot in the chest. They found my parents in the trunk, called my grandparents then they came and got me from camp. It was all one big, sad ordeal. And one of those ordeals that I can only recite from memory, and remember nothing about it. I don't remember how I felt about it. I don't remember crying at the funeral. I don't remember feeling anything after it happened. It all seemed very unreal. Like one day I would wake up, and be back in my bedroom, and my dad would be whistling and my mom would be singing to it. But that never happened. I never got to wake up in the bedroom. I never got to see them again. I never got anything but the money, and I would spend every penny of the money to get them back, but that's one thing you can't buy. Not with all of the money in the world. And so I was raised by my grandparents, and they did

their best to be parents, but even they said that they would never be able to replace the real thing. Like gold plated statues. They were never as good as real gold.

We finish eating and are waiting for the check, and Patrick's eyes get big, and he tells me to be still.

"What is it?" I whisper.

"Ashley. She just came in."

"Oh fuck."

"Who's Ashley?" Sarah whispers to Patrick.

"This girl that he met at John's party. The one that he's avoided for the last week."

"Why are you avoiding her? She's cute."

"That's not important. What's important is that I avoid her." I whisper back, kicking her under the table.

"Uh oh. She sees me." Patrick lifts his hand up and waves.

"I'm going to pretend like I'm asleep."

"No you're not! You're going to sit here and talk to her like she's a person."

"Hey Patrick."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Hey Ashley. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing okay. How about you?"

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