

Excerpt from “The Magnum Opus”

Jesse Sutter

A cup of thick, dark, Columbian coffee. A piece of whole wheat bread with a yellow, oozing pat of real butter. A green pill box with compartments signaling the days of the week. A whirring refrigerator that invaded the small apartment kitchen with a hostile shade of aged yellow. Blue wallpaper that was coming off in sheets. Stained, flower-patterned drapes framing a window that revealed a landscape of boxes that corralled hopes and dreams into four unforgiving walls. Walls that seemed to disappear over time and stop delivering painful reminders of one’s cruel fate. And a clock that has delivered a constant ticking noise to the past twenty years of Laura Caldwell’s life. Twenty years ago Henry died, leaving her the gift of this standard Sears & Roebuck clock, but also leaving her alone to waste away.

Laura sat in her chair and stared at this arrangement. What to consume first? She instinctively picked up the toast and started nibbling the edges, while staring at a small crack that had developed in the corner of her cramped kitchen. One could look at the deep creases in her 59 year old face and tell that she was deep in thought. This morning had not been very good for Laura. She had become very aware of her dull, dreary existence, due to her son stopping by the night before to ask for money. He said that he needed the money to pay the rent for his apartment, but he was lying. She could always tell. She gave him the money anyway. His ungrateful, entitled mop of a haircut seemed to insult Laura with the reality of crushed dreams.

She glanced at the pill box. She was getting that feeling again. A rush of fear, sadness, despair. She couldn’t push it away. She always tried. She followed her therapist’s directions and imagined a broom sweeping over the length of her body, wiping away the negativity. It never worked. It was her psychiatrist that prescribed the miracle solution. Triperadoral, the cutting edge technology in manic-depression research. It had been her savior for about six months now. One pill every morning, complemented by her buttered toast and coffee. It had worked for a while, but all good things must end.

Lately, the euphoric feeling the pill produced would only last for a couple of hours, and then the pain would come back, muted, but dreadfully noticeable.

She opened the Tuesday compartment in the pill box and stared at the boring, white pill. She sighed and rubbed her temples with distorted, arthritis ridden fingers that had not seen a manicure in many years. She glanced at Wednesday and Thursday. What could be the harm? She opened the two days with much trepidation. Then came Friday. Saturday opened with a small click. She dumped the five pills in her right hand and picked up the coffee cup with her left. The fear started washing away and was replaced with exhilaration. The thrill of the unknown. She threw the pills past her cracked, yellow teeth. Extremely caffeinated coffee followed them down.

Laura longed for peace. Laura longed for freedom. Laura longed to forget. Laura longed for the quick release pills to release more quickly. Laura got her wish.

Laura closed her eyes as she felt the warmth envelope her stomach. She could feel it surge through her veins. She followed the warmth through her legs, through her arms, up her neck. The surge of chemicals hit her brain like water being poured onto a sponge. Every cell, every synapse became saturated with the solution. Thump. Thump. Thump. A meat grinder pulling brain material through and turning it into a lumpy, grey sausage. Laura's eyes rolled into the back of her head as if they were so interested in the functioning of her brain that they had to take a look for themselves. But all Laura's eyes could see were the colorful fractals. Energy, light, shapes, all mixing together. She was being pulled in, lured by a shallow hope.

Now the fractals disappeared. Now it was silver disks that whizzed past her. She was being pulled forward, forward. Away, away. Towards what? The disks disappeared. The horizon was approaching. A red city appeared, swallowing the darkness. Towards a tall, box-like building. Towards a window. Inside a small, cramped room, surrounded by bare walls. An Asian man in a business suit walked right up to her. The light energy rolled from his suit, to his shoes, to the floor.

“Welcome Laura,’ He said, expressionless. “You are here to stay.”

“Laura, can you hear me?” The doctor shone a pen-light into Laura Caldwell’s irises. He snapped his fingers right next to her ear. Laura responded with a long stream of drool that descended from her gaping mouth to her hospital gown. He sighed, “Nurse, take her to the catatonic ward.”

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I scan the story. This might be my Magnum Opus. The idiots who read my fiction will love this piece. Psychedelic trips, doors to the mind, people can’t get enough of this stuff. I save the story as “Upping the Dosage.” Not a great title, but I can fix it later. I look out the window of my fourth floor office towards the tall, Portland buildings on the skyline. Damn boxes are everywhere.

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I take a deep breath in and slowly release it. I start to shuffle through my mail. Bills, court documents from my lawyer (some riffraff was trying to sue me for copyright infringement), and a couple of letters from the fans. I smile. The idiots love my fiction. My formula is simple, drag your protagonist through dog crap, barbed wire, drug addiction, or severe depression and get exalted for it. It’s the new wave of fiction. I am doing my civic duty, which is making people realize that life isn’t all butterflies and rainbows. It’s the best thing that I could do for their naïve, spineless souls.

I decide to open one fan letter. I open the one with the nicest handwriting on the envelope. It reads,

Dear Mr. Ian Stone,

I would like to start by saying that I admire you very much as a writer.

Your ability to excite the reader and grab his attention is remarkable. I do

question one aspect of your work. Your main characters always end up in sad, sordid states. Sure, your popularity is contingent on these outcomes, but I find it quite unamusing. As a police detective, I study a lot of people with issues with power and control. If a person cannot attain power and control in the manner that they want, they tend to take out their angst on things they can. Inanimate objects, animals, and even themselves. Could this be the case with you and your fiction? I urge you to take a look at this because it may lead to problems in your future.

Sincerely,

Barbara Lovell