

“Reminded me of when I watched *The Substance* for the very first time.

I was enthralled, disgusted, and deeply moved.”

—Eric LaRocca, author of *Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last Spoke*

NOTHING TASTES

A Novel

AS

*Bestselling
author of
The
Paleontologist*

GOOD



LUKE DUMAS

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NOTHING TASTES AS GOOD



A Novel

LUKE DUMAS

ATRIA BOOKS

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
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For my beautiful cousin Rachael

“Well, Joe,” said the trembling old lady. “I’m sure I have been a good mistress to you, Joe. You have invariably been treated very kindly. You have never had too much to do; and you have always had enough to eat.”

This last was an appeal to the fat boy’s most sensitive feelings. He seemed touched, as he replied emphatically— “I knows I has.”

“Then what can you want to do now?” said the old lady, gaining courage.

“I wants to make your flesh creep,” replied the boy.

—Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*

PROLOGUE

He's full, but the Hunger remains. Always. The need to gorge, as sharp and primal as fear. A rampant desire that only the threat of sickness can sate.

He's sick all right. Will he remember this when he wakes up in the morning, or just know from the scales of blood crusted around his mouth that he feasted like a king?

He hovers over the body laid out on the floor in an expanding pool of inky red: the splayed limbs, the naked chest pocked with meaty divots, the charcoal gaze slanting out of the broken head. If you didn't know better, you might think the man was contemplating the popcorn ceiling, wondering what it would cost to hire someone to bring it up-to-date.

The eater lowers himself to the carcass and inhales. The lingering body odor strengthens his Hunger. His lips part, baring slick, ready teeth.

The muscled shoulder, gym-honed as if for this purpose, puts up a fight against his bite and comes away with a ragged, snapping tear.

He chucks it back, champing like a dog with a chicken wing, mashes the sinew between his molars. There's not much flavor—bland and easy, slightly sweet. The coppery tang of its juices overwhelms.

They dribble down his chin, tickling, staining his shirt. Dragging a hand across his mouth, he leaves a glistening red smear.

He gets up to grab a napkin from the kitchen. Paper towel, something. Despite what they say, he's no animal. At least no more than anyone else.

Everybody has to eat.

Some bodies are just a little bit hungrier.

Monstera BioSciences

11093 Torreyana Road, San Diego, CA 92121

October 15, 2024

Don Levy, MD, PhD, Director
U.S. Food and Drug Administration Center for Drug Evaluation and Research
5901-B Ammendale Rd.
Beltsville, MD 20705

Subject: Abbreviated New Drug Application #407073

Dear Dr. Levy,

I am writing in response to your letter dated October 2, 2024, in which the FDA declined approval to market our transformational new weight loss product, ephaloma-copiramate. With all due respect, I am astounded and disturbed by your department's decision and the impact it may have on the well-being of this great nation.

As you are no doubt aware, more than 42 percent of the U.S. population is afflicted with obesity. The obese and their host of chronic illnesses—from high blood pressure to type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, and cancer—cost this country \$173 billion annually. The obese demand more frequent and intensive medical attention than their normal-sized counterparts, threatening the ability of everyday Americans to access necessary care; and the strenuous act of moving, lifting, and rolling them puts healthcare workers—78 percent of whom are women—at unconscionable physical risk.

Obesity epidemic be damned. Our country is entering the fourth decade of a war on fat, and we are losing. Years of education on nutritious eating and healthy active lifestyles have failed to penetrate the bulging layers of ignorance, denial, and inertia swallowing up our common sense. The obese masses have proven themselves incapable of lifting themselves out of their physical and rational decline when doing so demands prolonged effort and sacrifice. Something must be done to help them—help all of us—pave the way to a healthier, happier country.

With ephaloma-copiramate, Monstera BioSciences has done just that. Not since Pfizer and BioNTech manufactured the first Covid vaccine has a pharmaceutical product had the potential to annihilate such a nasty and virulent pestilence. We at Monstera BioSciences are blazing the trail into a future unburdened by the ugly consequences of immoderation. With this product, we have the ability to eradicate obesity forever.

I understand the FDA has concerns about the safety of the product as a result of the disturbing situation regarding clinical trial participant no. 82941, whose acquired taste for human flesh made national headlines last year. Although we take these concerns extremely seriously, we can assure you that the alleged "dangerous side effects" observed in the course of the patient's treatment were wholly unrelated to the product being trialed.

To prove this, we have contracted Prentice & Darrow LLP, an independent firm specializing in impartial liability inquiries, to conduct a thorough investigation into the alleged unintended impacts of ephaloma-copiramate. Through interviews with the participant's friends and family, along with careful review of the patient's online writings, personal health journals, and other evidence, this investigation will prove that the participant was deeply disordered and morally compromised long before the start of the trial, and that the violent deaths reported in the media have no bearing on the safety of this lifesaving product.

I look forward to presenting the investigators' full findings as part of our formal appeal. I have no doubt it will alter your thinking on this matter.

Whether in a year, a decade, or a century, we will overturn CDER's decision.

We must, for the greatest health and happiness of the country.

Sincerely,

Cecil H. Smith, PhD
Founder & Chief Science Officer

CHAPTER 1

Emmett's heart thudded as he stood before the vending machine, scanning the rows of chips and chocolate held captive behind their black metal rings. *Come on, come on, just pick something*, he thought. The break room was empty, but it wouldn't stay that way long. He had only moments, seconds maybe, before someone came in and caught him at it, before the warm flush of comfort he'd been craving all morning was dampened by the cold deluge of shame that came with being caught.

Hearing footsteps down the hall, he panicked and punched in the code for a bag of baked chips, the least satisfying of all possible choices.

Fuck.

As the ring swirled, pushing his selection to the edge of the shelf, Emmett could no longer avoid his reflection in the glass. In the mirror at home he almost passed for unremarkable, but set against the backdrop of the outside world, there was no getting around it—around *him*. His five-foot-eleven frame; his hair, neon pink fading to ash brown, framing the exaggerated circularity of his face; the bulging chest beneath his scarlet parachute of a tee.

Emmett Truesdale had never been bigger, but in some ways he hadn't changed at all. Even at the age of five or six, growing up on the northern fringes of his Southern California community, he'd daydreamed of taking a knife and shearing the fat off his body. He'd fantasized about being impaled with tubes and having the excess sucked out of him, being pricked with needles and drained like a blister. His sides had been a particular heartache, the way the flesh, bypassing his relatively flat stomach, collected like meaty saddlebags beside and behind him. His chest too—his “boobs” as his brother called them, before his hand darted out to squeeze and twist.

Imaginative Emmett had sat for hours on the toilet, Mickey Mouse undies looped around his ankles, awash in the fantasy of a procedure, medicine, or enchantment that would allow him to absorb the fat back into his digestive tract and purge it into the bowl with a plop. Never once had he blown out his birthday candles or glimpsed a star arcing across the night sky without wringing the words through his mind: *I wish I was thin.*

“Hey.” His coworker Jazz came in, burgundy polo snug against her slender frame, with a Frappuccino and half a dozen paper Starbucks sleeves. “Got muffins. They were getting rid of them.” She dumped them onto the table as she sat, not even taking one for herself.

Emmett reached down for his chips, his stomach screaming. “I’m good.”

He could barely keep his eyes off the muffins as he returned to the table. But now that he had company, he was glad he’d chosen something with a sheen of healthfulness.

Jazz had taken the good side of the table, the side closest to and facing the wall, so Emmett grabbed a seat on the opposite side. He flattened his shirt over his butt crack before he sat, ensuring it wouldn’t show through the gap in the back of the chair.

It was among the greatest frustrations of Emmett’s body that clothes didn’t fit it. Most stores didn’t even carry his size now that he was a 4XL, but even made-to-measure garments rejected his physique. In his twenty-eight years he had yet to meet a tailor who could jury-rig a pant to stay up on his so-called waist, the downward slide of flesh formed between his expansive sides and the bottom of his lumpy pancake of an ass. Even when belted tightly enough to induce necrosis, pants barely stayed up a minute or two before inching down past his crack. He’d grown used to feeling it peeking out above his waistband all day, safely concealed under the untucked back of his shirt as long as he could avoid reaching up, bending down, or, ideally, moving at all.

As he and Jazz retreated into the silence of their phones, Emmett salivated over intrusive thoughts of blueberry and cinnamon sugar and began to cycle through his usual apps: email (junk), Pokémon GO (caught ’em all), Instagram (barely a like on his morning post). As he swiped through his stories—photos of