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NOTHING TASTES AS GOOD

LUKE DUMAS


canelo

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

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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 health-care 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 ripped shirtless OnlyFans models, his brother's kids, his mom's morning latte—he came across an ad and paused.

The promoted story was bright, sleekly designed, and showed two versions of the same face, one morphing into the other. On the left side the woman was heavy and hangdog; on the right, thin, radiant, smiling, as if she'd shed a gray and dying blubber to reveal fresh, thriving skin underneath.

Groundbreaking weight loss clinical trial, read the accompanying text. Generous compensation provided.

Swipe up to learn more.

Emmett experienced an impulsive tug at the top of his abdomen like the one compelling him to reach for a muffin. Too late—the story elapsed while he was still taking it in.

He continued through his friends' posts, or tried to, liking and commenting on almost every one. But despite his best efforts, he couldn't get the ad out of his head. He backtracked to find it again. Grew desperate when it eluded him.

It wasn't just that Emmett presently found himself at his highest-ever weight—somewhere in the high 310s, he guessed, having avoided the scale since the catastrophic collapse of his New Year's resolution diet in the second week of January. It wasn't just that “beach body season” was fast approaching, a meaningless weight loss industry scare tactic that nevertheless occupied more space in his mind than most actual holidays. It wasn't just that he hadn't had a proper boyfriend since college, surviving instead on periodic Grindr hookups that left him

feeling more grotesque and disposable than the loneliness did. Or that he feared he'd already ruined his life with some as yet undiagnosed health disaster and would probably drop dead any moment of a heart attack or stroke, his lifeless body undulating across the floor, crack exposed, his fat laid bare for the whole world to see.

As much as any of that, he could really fucking use the cash.

His fifteen-minute break over, Emmett said goodbye to Jazz and resumed his post at the guest services desk. It was a typical weekday at Target. Traffic picked up around 11 a.m., and by lunchtime the line of customers waiting to collect online purchases was halfway to Bullseye's Playground. There were issues with several orders, forcing Emmett to make hurried, out-of-breath trips back and forth across the store in search of this video game or that floor lamp—no, not the black one, the *gold*. A woman accused him of lying about the price of an air fryer and demanded to see his supervisor. A man insulted Emmett's hair because the store's AC wasn't working.

Emmett clocked in and out for lunch but worked through, skipping his afternoon break so his coworker could leave early for an appointment. The appearance of an adorable five-year-old in a Pikachu costume brought him his only genuine smile of the day, before the child pointed up at the sweat patches under Emmett's arms and squealed, “*Ew. Fat boy stinks!*”

Checkout was short-staffed, so for the final leg of his nine-hour shift Emmett was asked to fill in. His feet ached, arches throbbing. Or was it more of a prickle? He'd heard numbness in the feet was an early warning sign of diabetes. Could feet ache and be numb at the same time?

It was probably nothing, but he ought to get blood work done just to be safe. The thought filled him with dread. Unfortunately, *safe* was not a word he associated with the doctor's office.

In between customers he switched to a register equipped with a stool for an off-duty cashier with a broken foot. He

pulled the seat up to the counter and perched against it, his feet still throbbing as he scanned the next customer's purchases.

A throb—definitely not a prickle.

Emmett was finally clocking out for the day when a voice spoke behind him. "Hey, Emmett, how's it going?"

Emmett jumped. It was the store manager, Ricardo, aka Rick the Prick, a goateed goblin of a man who lorded his authority over the hourly staff like a good-humored king in a Hagar brand suit jacket.

"Hey, Rick," Emmett said. "Scared me."

"Sorry, didn't mean to give you a heart attack. That's the last thing you need, eh? Ha! Say, would you mind stepping into my office?"

"Uh—" Emmett was already clocked out.

"It'll be quick."

He followed Rick to his office with a crawling feeling in his chest. Had he done something wrong? Was he being fired? He admitted his performance wasn't what it used to be. After all these years without a promotion, he didn't see the point of going above and beyond anymore.

The room was square and windowless, the red walls clashing with Rick's collection of framed Padres jerseys. "Can you get the door?"

"Everything okay?"

"Nothing to worry about. Just want a quick word."

They sat facing each other across the desk. Bobbleheaded baseballers nodded down at Emmett from the hutch, men he couldn't have named for all the cash in the store. It was a long time ago now that his dad had taken him to Qualcomm Stadium to see the Padres play, back when Emmett was still trying to care about things his father approved of. The games ran together in his mind now: the same nine innings of boredom punctuated

by a steady stream of all-beef hot dogs, unshelled peanuts, and ice cream.

"Say, Emmett, I got some feedback from one or two of your team members and I just thought you'd want to know."

"Feedback?"

"Probably just a misunderstanding. A couple people mentioned you were sitting at your check stand this afternoon. Actually, I happened to notice that too."

Rick was always doing this, using "feedback" as a cover for what were clearly his own opinions. Had anyone even said anything? Emmett bristled, knowing they likely had.

"Maybe you didn't realize, but that stool's for Josie to use while her foot heals."

"Josie finished at three."

"Right, of course. I wasn't suggesting..." Rick rephrased: "It's just that I think a couple people were a little... I mean, everyone would love to sit back and relax, wouldn't they?"

"I wasn't relaxing. I was working."

"But working hard or...?"

The blood rushed to Emmett's cheeks, his outrage squishy and tender.

"Look," Rick said with a magnanimous smile, "if you say you were working, I believe it. I just wanted you to know how this kind of thing might look. No one wants to see a teammate sitting down on the job. Literally!" He barked out a laugh.

"Was there anything else?"

"No, no."

Emmett rose, feeling his crack inching above his sagging belt. He resisted the urge to hike up his pants; in front of Rick, it would feel like defeat.

He opened the door.

"Actually, there was one other thing now I think about it. Someone made a comment—and I know the AC wasn't working up front and it can get kind of sweaty."

Emmett's stomach dropped. *Please don't say it.*

"Just maybe think about putting on an extra lick of deodorant in the morning, huh, buddy?"

A pair of teenage associates stopped in the hall as they were passing, their eyes flicking over Emmett's body.

Spluttering into their hands, they hurried on.

Emmett felt the prickle return, this time hot behind his eyes.

Emmett had his phone out as he got into his car and started the ignition. The AC was broken here too—he couldn't afford to get it fixed now that his rent had gone up—so he rolled down the windows to get a breeze through while he sat flipping through his stories. Not idly this time, but with intention. *Where is it?*

He fretted that it had gone, that he'd missed his chance.

A knot of tension loosened in his chest as he found it. Or rather, it found him.

The model gazed up at him with two pairs of eyes, one sad, the other sparkling out rays of inner joy. As his thumb hovered over the words *learn more*, Emmett wrestled with his better judgment.

He wasn't dumb enough to be fooled by this. She was obviously Photoshopped, barely even real. This "groundbreaking" weight loss treatment probably wasn't real either.

But the sick feeling tugging down on his heart, that was real.

The never-ending humiliation and degradation, that was real.

The feeling of being trapped inside his own body, inside his own life: that was as real as it fucking came.

Other than the obvious, what did he have to lose?

Investigative Report Prepared for Monstera BioSciences BY PRENTICE & DARROW LLP

Excerpt from "Part 1: Background" (pp. 18–19)

In early 2018, five years prior to the commencement of Monstera's Phase II clinical trial, participant no. 82941 launched a weblog titled *The Messy Adventures of Emmett Truesdale*. He posted more than thirty entries in the space of eighteen months, at first weekly, then dropping to twice monthly over the summer. New posts were increasingly sporadic thereafter.

The blog fell dormant in 2020 before being resurrected in late 2022 as *The True Me*. The goal of the rebranded site, according to its author, was:

To pull back the curtain on my weight loss journey. To share the good, the bad, and the ugly of getting fit and finding myself. To hold myself accountable, even when my stomach is screaming at me for an In-N-Out Double-Double and fries!!! Most importantly, to peel back the layers of shame, disordered eating, and—yes—FAT, that have been holding me back my entire life.

In other words, to finally expose the person underneath all that extra weight. The real Emmett Truesdale—the "true" me.

A number of the participant's own blog posts have been provided as appendices to this report as evidence of the facts stated herein.

What Am I Doing with My Life; or, Right Off Target

By: Emmett Truesdale | Published: Feb. 13, 2023

Call me crazy, but I never imagined that I'd be using my master's degree in education to teach people the benefits of signing up for a Target RedCard. Like many of my millennial generation, I was raised to believe that having done all the "right things" according to society—applied myself in school, gotten my degree, worked hard throughout my twenties—I would eventually be released from this poverty-wage, essential-worker purgatory to the celestial climes of financial competence.

Okay, boomer.

Last month I turned twenty-eight—that's TWO. EIGHT.—and I'm no closer to being able to afford my own apartment than to convincing Harry Styles to run away with me to a remote island off the coast of Ireland to share a quiet life raising miniature horses and obliterating each other's buttocks nightly. My clothes are rags. My 2008 Ford Taurus is practically in hospice. The check-engine light has been on so long that the little icon has seared into my retinas. Every time my car makes a weird noise, I'm convinced it's muttering judgments on my poor life choices. "Another seven-dollar iced latte?" it says. "I don't have air-conditioning, you fat son of a bitch!"

Not that I ever expected to be rich. For the longest time my dream was to be a teacher. Helping people expand their view of the world and themselves through education is something I've always

been passionate about. So after majoring in social science at San Diego State University, I ended up going back for my MA with the goal of teaching middle school social studies. What was I thinking?



Denied financial assistance because of my family income—to which I of course had no access, my parents having decided they'd "done enough" by throwing a few thousand dollars a year toward my undergraduate studies—I took out another loan, and even then I only survived by taking up residence in the tiny second bedroom of my mom's condo in Little Italy.

The property, purchased with the settlement from Mom's second divorce, was a kooky homage to her proud Sicilian heritage, stuffed with antique furniture, framed paintings of mustached chefs in white jackets, and a daily influx of artisan olive oils, breads, and pastas. The woman kept so much food in the house that it burst out of the kitchen cabinets, spilling luxuriantly over the faux-granite counters. I could barely turn around without sending a baguette flying into the dog's water bowl.

Don't get me wrong. I love my mom—seriously, she's the best. Loving and caring and always the first person to help. We've always had a special relationship. Even when the whole world seems to think I'm a pile of crap, Mom is always there with unconditional love and support.

She often tells the story of how after I was born she took me to meet my uncle Gene and aunt Laura, and after ten minutes in my company, Uncle Gene delivered, in his cartoonish New York accent, the now-iconic line "There's somethin' special about that boy!" It's since become a kind of shorthand between Mom and me. Whenever she's feeling particularly proud or sentimental, she'll do her Uncle Gene voice and it never fails to cheer me up.

Still, living with her in my twenties wasn't the life I'd imagined. The apartment was overstuffed with furniture and pets. Mom's lifestyle was chaotic, borderline nomadic, with her constantly leaving

town to visit her sisters and long-distance boyfriend, Hal. But more than anything I longed for the day I could detach from her obligatory generosity, strike out from the suffocating muchness of her small life, and carve out a space in the world all my own.

In some ways, it felt like a pipe dream. The housing crisis only seemed to be getting worse. I would struggle to afford rent on even the cheapest apartment.

And yet I was forced to do just that when, in typical Mom style, she announced that she was selling the condo and moving to Las Vegas to marry Hal, whom my siblings and I had barely met.

I flew into a panic, not knowing where I was going to live. I couldn't stay with my dad, who'd retired to Cabo San Lucas during Covid (nice for him 😊), and no offers of assistance were forthcoming from my older siblings, despite both of them having plenty of space 😊😊. With nowhere to go, I'd have to scrape together an extra \$1,250 a month to sublet a room in a stranger's dump of an apartment, which meant I'd need to get a job. I know, I know, I should've already had one—because in this country it's not enough to *get* an education; apparently one has to suffer for it too 😊😊😊.

In a moment of desperation I applied for a job as a part-time "customer advocate" at Target (cue torrential barfing). The store was close by, it paid above minimum wage, and, like of course, Target was my happy place (note the use of the past tense there 🤢).

Anyway, I got the job and promised myself I'd be out of there as soon as I secured a full-time teaching position. Six months tops.

*****Slams head repeatedly on the desk*****

Suffice it to say, that day hasn't come.

I'm going to tell you what happened, but honestly part of me is dreading it. The last thing I want to do is reinforce the stereotype that fat people are "quitters" who don't work hard or see things

through. But on this occasion, I did give up, and I'm still wondering if it was the right choice.

All right, here goes.

In order to earn a California teaching credential, you have to complete five years of higher education and six hundred hours of unpaid student teaching—one of the highest requirements for teachers in the country. My student-teaching schedule was eight to four, five days a week, but I still had to pay my way, so I fit it in around a full-time load of evening and weekend shifts at the store.

My first semester, at a high school on the southside, wasn't so bad. Though I looked and lived differently than most of the sophomores in my class, the kids were great and my cooperating teacher even better, providing a ton of resources and guidance, and helping to manage the students who acted up.

The trouble started on my second assignment, teaching social studies at an upper-crust middle school in La Jolla. Joining a class in the second semester is always harder, because you're interrupting the class's established routine. In my case, I had the added disadvantage of following Mr. Jeffries, a hunky former college football star with a sizable TikTok following, which blew up even more after he started posting funny videos inspired by his student-teaching experience. He was beloved, and I could tell from day one—in fact, the moment those kids laid eyes on me—that I was like a bag of Taco Bell Cinnamon Twists at the end of a Michelin-star meal. (For the record, I fucking love those Twists.)

"You look kind of like Mr. Jeffries, but like the before in a before-and-after picture," one kid blurted out, and the whole class laughed.

I brushed it off. *If you want to do this job*, I told myself, *you're gonna have to learn to take a joke.*

These random outbursts of mockery, I soon realized, were relatively harmless. Those students—in many cases, the less academically inclined of the class—were just saying stuff as it occurred

to them rather than being intentionally malicious. It was the more intelligent kids who got under my skin, because I could tell they were going out of their way to hurt me.

There was one boy in particular—for the sake of this story let's call him Tentacruel (that one's for all you Pokémon fans 🐉). Tentacruel would sit at the back of the class, often with his feet on the desk. He wasn't a hard worker but was naturally gifted, doing no work and acing every test and quiz. He had a certain talent for pinpointing my shortcomings and insecurities and calling them out in front of the class—making fun of my Target-brand clothes and how they fit, humiliating me when I accidentally misspelled a word on the whiteboard. "What, does San Diego State not teach spelling?" he jeered.

What made it harder was that my cooperating teacher this time around just sat back. No guidance or support, never helped keep Tentacruel or his friends in check, and if I tried to kick them out of class and they refused, she'd just shrug at me as if to say, *What do you want me to do about it? I just work here.*

Fortunately, not all the kids were that bad. In fact, some were pretty great. For example, there was one kid—let's call him Oddish—whom I liked a lot. He was smart, quiet, and had this dark sense of humor I loved. Carrying a few extra pounds himself, he reminded me so much of myself at that age, and I couldn't help but be fond of him.

Once in a while he'd stay in at lunchtime and we'd talk until the bell rang. About his home life, school, the life he wanted to have one day. Funny as he was, there was a sadness about him that I understood all too well. I opened up about how in sixth grade Sean Davis and Reece Papadatos used to terrorize me about my weight, pelting me with French fries as I ate lunch, convincing half the class to call me Titty Truesdale. Knowing who his classmates were, I thought Oddish might've been bullied himself and it might

help him to know he wasn't alone, that there was at least one adult in his life who understood.

He started staying in at lunch more often. He was nervous because there was a big test coming up and he was struggling to remember the finer differences between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. I created flash cards and we ran through them daily. He memorized all of them and scored a 97 percent, the highest score in the class, even higher than Tentacruel. I was so proud of him, and even better, he was proud of himself. I thought, *THIS is why I love teaching.*

Then one day as I entered the room, I saw him gesturing to a couple of his classmates, inflating his cheeks and cupping imaginary breasts. They went silent as soon as they saw me but kept laughing behind their hands. Was Oddish making fun of me?

I let it go; I was already at my wit's end after Tentacruel and his friends had upped the ante on their cruelty. Like their classmates, they were each given a Chromebook to work on, which it was my job to monitor. I could see what the kids were searching in Google, and Tentacruel apparently thought that was a great way to send veiled messages directly to me.

Why is Mr. Truesdale so fat?

Did Mr. Truesdale eat his last class and that's why he's such a blimp?

Why is Mr. Truesdale so bad at teaching?

When is Mr. Truesdale going to give up already?

On top of that, the stress of my life outside the classroom was starting to get to me. I was working close to seventy hours a week, not including the time I spent grading assignments and lesson planning. I was barely surviving financially, even before my car decided it needed a new transmission and brakes. I was gaining weight like crazy because of the stress of it all, and the worst part was that no one seemed to be happy with me. The kids hated me. The store resented my lack of daytime availability. And I kept