

**Sweetboy**

An excerpt from the novel, *Sweetboy*

Ronnie Courtland watched his son crying in the crib and could not help thinking that he lacked some essential parental quality, some innate talent that Sheila-Ann provided that he could not, and that his son, though only an infant, intuitively understood what Ronnie had known his whole life to be true—that he quite simply wasn’t good enough.

Ronnie was having a Newport in the corner of the living room, exhaling through a small crack in the window while he waved a plastic handheld fan to protect Sweetboy from the smoke. Across the room on the kitchen counter was a paper bag from the party store that held a half-gallon of vodka and a twelve pack of beer. He’d called Sing at the store and he’d run up the booze on his break for a five-dollar tip.

“I thought you were on the wagon,” Sing had said.

“I was. I am.”

“Rough ride?”

“It can get a little bumpy,” Ronnie said. “But this isn’t for me.”

“Yeah,” Sing said. “I know.”

Ronnie took the sack and paid Sing, and he’d spent the last two hours putting off drinking. On the one hand, he knew he could call his sponsor, but the truth was, it made him feel good to just have the vodka near him, to know it was there if he needed it, and the longer he went without drinking it the more he told himself that maybe he wasn’t an alcoholic at all. He’d never gone that long without drinking when a perfectly good sack of booze was right there waiting for him, and so he thought it might indicate that the year of sobriety had cured him and that it may now be reasonable to pour himself a little nip of the Vladimir and sit down and wait out Sweetboy’s crying jag like a civilized human being.

That was all just bullshit he was telling himself though, and beneath his reasoning and rationales there was a deeper, singular clarity. He knew exactly what would happen when he picked up a drink. What he was trying to decide was if he cared.

The truth was he wasn’t even supposed to be left alone with Sweetboy for more than two hours at a time. At least that was what

the judge said. It was all part of his probation. Sheila-Ann had filed for separation while Ronnie was in jail, which didn't mean they were divorced, but it didn't mean they were married either. Ronnie didn't know, it all seemed so complicated. What happened was he got picked up on his third DUI and spent eight months in jail and one month in an inpatient treatment facility. Sheila-Ann discovered she was pregnant shortly after Ronnie was arrested, and under constant pressure from her mother, finally filed for a separation and full custody of their unborn child.

Ronnie had been out of treatment for five weeks and sober for a year, and it seemed like things were going good with Sheila-Ann. He was staying over some nights now, and he could feel her opening to him, even if it was only slightly, and he'd viewed his three days in charge of Sweetboy as an opportunity to prove that he could be a good father, if only Sheila-Ann and the State of Michigan would give him the chance.

He put out his cigarette and lit another and Sweetboy kept crying. Ronnie wished Sheila-Ann's daddy wouldn't have died. That's what started it all. Edward had a heart attack and Sheila-Ann was summoned to her mother's in Detroit for the funeral. She would have taken Sweetboy, but she refused to cancel his appointment with Dr. Amala. Everybody in Cutler wanted their kids to see Dr. Amala, and Sweetboy had been on the waiting list since Sheila-Ann's first trimester. The only other pediatrician in Cutler was Louis Petry, who was grossly incompetent and had at one time or another misdiagnosed and mistreated nearly everyone in town that was now rearing children of their own.

There was no money for a sitter, of course. The economy in Michigan was bad. Ronnie didn't know what made an economy go bad, but it always seemed like it happened in Michigan. He worked construction, which was slow anyway during a northern Michigan winter, but it had been tough to find any work at all since he got out. Sheila-Ann was a waitress at the Elias Brothers and she was barely making rent, and so he'd been her only and best option.

She didn't even have to mention that he had arrived at his final chance—he knew it, from the too-tired-to-say-another-word desperation with which she had looked at him as she handed over their son. Her

love was broken down and weary in her eyes, but it was still there, the love. That was the one thing Ronnie had going for him, the love of this woman, this valiant and tireless soul who had one day appeared in his life unannounced, this woman who was made of pure heart and sweetness, and had stood defenseless against a man like himself.

He'd had big plans for his three days with Sweetboy. He was going to bond with him, to spend some time just holding him and poking at his belly and trying to teach him to say *Daddy*. Right now Sweetboy only cried and made gurgling sounds, and Ronnie thought that if he could get him to talk while Sheila-Ann was gone, it would clinch a full reunion with his wife and the termination of their separation.

He was going to use the time while Sweetboy slept to sort baseball cards. It was one of the goals he'd set for himself in jail. He was finally going to sit down and go through the cardboard boxes of loose cards that, to Ronnie, so clearly marked the end of his innocence—thousands of Topps Baseball Cards that never got sorted because he started breaking into his old man's liquor cabinet when he was just twelve years old and nothing had been quite the same since.

He wasn't going to sell the cards either. He was going to organize them by team, just like he did when he was little, before he even knew that baseball cards were worth money, and when things like having the entire Detroit Tigers team set was of the utmost importance. He would group the teams by division and place them all in a shoe box, neatly stacked and sorted so that he could pull them out at any time to peruse the trivia questions and statistics on the backs.

When Sweetboy was old enough he'd pass the cards on to him, and the last thing he wanted to do was present the boy with a sloppy, poorly-maintained collection. No, Ronnie would give Sweetboy a well-cared-for piece of history, something of real value that he could show his friends, something he could start off with, a gift that he would have in this world just because he was Ronnie's son.

Ronnie remembered the excitement he'd felt only a day earlier when he'd pulled the boxes out of the closet and sat down to begin the task, his boy sleeping in the crib beside him. He remembered the first phone call from Sheila-Ann, and how he told her that everything was

going great, and that he missed her and loved her and couldn't wait to have her home, but that in the meantime he and Sweetboy were doing just fine as bachelors, thank you very much.

"Good," she had said, and Ronnie couldn't detect even the slightest trace of distrust or concern in her voice, though he knew it was there.

Later that night Sweetboy woke up crying, and Ronnie fed him and burped him, but for some reason his son felt awkward and foreign in his hands. He'd changed diapers and cared for Sweetboy before, but it was different with Sheila-Ann there, standing in the doorway watching, talking to Sweetboy and soothing him as Ronnie worked. And there were times that she simply had to take over, and she would lift their son gently from Ronnie's arms and soon Sweetboy would stop crying—but now, without his mother, he didn't stop until he passed out from exhaustion.

Ronnie could hear him rolling around in the crib all night, and every time Sweetboy woke up he went right back to crying. He cried and he cried and he cried. He cried until snot bubbles came out of his nose and he was a pure purple, shaking desperation. Sweetboy cried all night and Ronnie didn't fall asleep until sometime after four, and he slept clear through his alarm the next morning and missed Sweetboy's appointment with Dr. Amala.

Ronnie was chain-smoking now. Bitter, clean February air pushed through the window and stung his knuckles as he dangled his cigarettes outside and kept his fan running. He'd called Dr. Amala's but they couldn't get Sweetboy in for another appointment for six weeks.

"I'll pay double," Ronnie had said. "If you can squeeze me in today or tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," the nurse said. "But it doesn't work that way."

"Well, how does it work?" Ronnie said. "Can you tell me that?"

"I'm sorry, sir," she'd said. "But I have other patients to assist."

He looked at his pile of unsorted baseball cards on the coffee table and then at the booze on the counter. Sweetboy wailed in his crib, and Ronnie thought about how amorphous and all-powerful forces like economics and the law and death had once again conspired to put him in a place where the only avenue of escape, no matter how brief, appeared to be a drink.

He wanted to call Sheila-Ann but since the Thanksgiving he'd passed out drunk and wet himself on her mother's couch at two in the afternoon, he'd been forbidden from entering her home, even via telephone. There were other incidents, of course. It wasn't like that Thanksgiving was the first time Ronnie had a little mishap that inconvenienced the Krazenski family, but for some reason that was the one that finally turned Sheila-Ann's mother, Anna, against him. He'd woken up to her screaming and slapping him in the face.

"What kind of man is this!" she yelled. "What kind of man wets himself in the pants! What kind of man is drunk in the day, and in front of the children! He has ruined our couch, Sheila-Ann, the fabric is ruined!"

Ronnie vaguely remembered being dragged outside by some of Sheila-Ann's cousins. He remembered her father, Edward, who'd always been his best shot for an ally in the Krazenski family, looking at him and shaking his head in disgust. He remembered children around the folding card table in the kitchen, construction paper Pilgrims and Indians pinned to their shirts, their eyes wild with fear. No, Ronnie couldn't just call up Mrs. Krazenski and see how everybody was doing and ask her did she have any parenting tips.

After the fifth cigarette, Ronnie shut the window and went in the bedroom and got on the Internet. His cousin Maurice had given him his old laptop computer, and he was using the neighbors' wireless signal until he got the money together for a modem and an account of his own.

He googled "*baby won't stop crying*" and discovered that long crying fits were symptomatic of thirty-six diseases, ranging from colic to congenital syphilis, and something that involved inflammation of brain tissue. It made Ronnie sick to think that a baby could be born with syphilis, or AIDS for Christ's sake. Babies could be born addicted to crack and heroin or anything else, which wasn't to mention the babies that were born in Africa with inflated heads and bellies, and were likely to die of starvation.

Sheila-Ann was always sponsoring kids and sending money to Sally Struthers, and here she could barely scrape rent together. Sometimes Ronnie hated the world. It was full of bastards and liars and rich people, who for the price of a cup of coffee a day, could save a child's life, but

instead spent their money on Carnival Cruises and riding lessons for their shitty, spoiled kids. Ronnie had never been on a cruise in his life. He'd never been to Disney World either, or ridden a horse. He couldn't remember the last time he and Sheila-Ann took a vacation, or if they ever had at all. Their honeymoon had been three days camping in the Upper Peninsula, which was fine, Ronnie wasn't complaining; it was just that it wasn't a trip to the Hawaiian Islands or Europe, like most people got.

Ronnie called Dr. Amala's office again and spoke with the same nurse.

"My boy won't stop crying," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's Ronnie Courtland," he said. "My boy won't stop crying."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I've already told you that Dr. Amala can't see your son today."

"He's been crying for almost a day straight. He's shaking he's crying so bad."

"Have you considered taking him to the emergency room?"

"He could have syphilis or colic or inflammation of the brain."

"He could just have gas as well, sir."

"Don't belittle me."

"I'm not," she said. "You raised your voice at me and I'm trying to be as polite as possible."

"I'm sorry. It's just that we missed that appointment."

"I told you we'd be happy to reschedule for as soon as we can, and we can put you on the waiting list if there's any cancellations."

"We've already been on the list."

"I'm sorry, sir, that's the best I can do."

"I know," Ronnie said. "But he won't stop crying."

"I can give you the number to the ER."

"I don't know," Ronnie said. "Do they even take babies?"

"Yes they do," she said. "Of course."

The nurse read off the number, but Ronnie didn't have a pen. He was going to stop her, but he figured he'd troubled her enough and didn't want to get any further on her bad side. He thought he could remember it anyway, and when it was over, he walked into the kitchen, repeating the

digits in his head. He looked around for a pen, and when he couldn't find one, he leaned against the kitchen counter and listened to his son sob.

After a while he poured a glass of vodka. He capped the bottle and left it out on the counter and did not drink from the glass. He walked over to the crib and looked down at Sweetboy and in his son's tears Ronnie saw only confirmation of his own innate shortcomings and perpetual failures. Sweetboy's sobs were the bitter, high-pitched acknowledgment of the constancy of loss and tragic hilarity that had defined Ronnie's first twenty-eight years and he knew now that he was defenseless against them.

Sweetboy cried and Ronnie remembered the night of Sheila-Ann's twenty-second birthday. He had just picked up a bouquet of roses and was on his way to surprise her with the flowers when he turned in to the Paradise Junction bar. He was going to have a quick drink before her birthday dinner, but one thing led to another, and two days later he wound up on the side of Kolinski Road, twenty miles from the bar, in his boxer shorts and a pair of somebody else's slippers, holding a single red rose.

He remembered motel rooms with bizarre, unnerving carpet stains and smoke-yellowed walls, and the despondence of being whiskey drunk and having nothing to do but watch daytime television. Sweetboy cried and Ronnie remembered the DUIs and the shame of his name in the back of the paper and how on the day of his wedding, on the day he pledged himself to a woman who was so clearly the best thing that had ever happened to him, he should have run down the aisle with boundless joy and undying gratitude but instead found the prospect of his own happiness so terrifying and unnatural that he couldn't face it without first consulting a pint in the men's bathroom of the First Presbyterian Church.

Sweetboy cried and Ronnie was shit-faced drunk and standing on the altar, chewing four sticks of Wrigley's Spearmint gum and trying not to look his wife in the eyes.

But most of all, when Sweetboy cried, Ronnie remembered the day his father first revealed the truth that would become his constant and primary torment, a truth that he believed was at the root of the heartbreak

and the alcoholism and the misery and the failure and everything else. It was a truth he was burdened with shortly after his eighth birthday.

“Half-pint,” his dad had said. “I once cheated a man out of twelve dollars in a card game.”

“You won twelve dollars?” Ronnie said.

They were sitting at the kitchen table after dinner. Ronnie remembered his dad’s Jim Beam and a bottle of Heinz Tomato Ketchup between them. It was early in the autumn, and he remembered how the sunlight drew itself back across the tiles, and how along their dirt road the beech trees were shot through with color.

“I won because I cheated. I was stationed in Ft. Worth and was heading for a little town named Lubbock.”

“Were you married to mom?”

“No, Half-pint. I was a young man full of hope and opportunity. My life was just beginning.”

“Do you still love mom?”

“Yes, Half-pint. But let me get to heart of the matter.”

“Does mom love us?”

“In her own way.”

“Is she ever coming home?”

“Not in this lifetime, Half-pint. We might as well shoot straight about that. You’re getting to be a big boy now.”

“What did you do with the twelve dollars?”

“I didn’t do anything with that twelve dollars. I went and flushed it down the toilet.”

Ronnie was in the third grade, and couldn’t believe what his father had just said. Who’d ever heard of a person putting money in a toilet bowl? “You flushed twelve dollars down the toilet?” he said.

“I had just been cursed with some serious black magic, and I was trying to get rid of it. You see, Half-pint, the man I cheated had steel-gray eyes and wore a black felt fedora. He was skinny and pale and wore a pinstripe suit and snakeskin boots. He called himself Louisiana Long. Never cheat a man in snakeskin boots, Half-pint. It’s what they call a poor decision.”

“What’s black magic?”

“It’s an ancient, sacred art of wickedness. And both you and I have been cursed by it. You see, Louisiana Long looked at me across the table after I cheated him, and his gray eyes got real, real dark. Graveyard black. They changed colors right there in front of me, and then I got this real cold shiver down my spine—like when you’re walking up the basement stairs and feel like something is behind you.”

“The basement’s scary,” said Ronnie.

“That’s because we’ve been cursed and are haunted by evil. And I’ve known it since the next hand Louisiana Long dealt me. It was aces and eights, and that, Half-pint, is what they call the ‘dead man’s hand.’ And ever since that day my life has been nothing but tragedy and heartbreak, and I knew the curse carried on to you when you was born with your birthmark.”

Ronnie had a purple port-wine stain that covered half his face, and the kids at school said his mother had left him and his daddy because of it. The birthmark began in the right corner of his forehead and fell in a wide splash across his nose, and ran all the way down to the base of his neck—leaving only the left eye and part of his right cheek unblemished. For a time he had thought the stain was the extent of the curse, but it wound up being only the beginning.

Ronnie’s momma never did come home, and as further and continual proof of the curse, he suffered an impossible string of canceled flights, wrong exits, strange rashes, and broken hearts. He was always having engine trouble and oil leaks, and was forever leaving his lights on in the rain. He was a no-luck gambler with a high-stakes history and a knack for bad cards and hot dealers. He had low self-esteem, bad breath, poor credit, alcoholism, and the ramblin’-man blues. He had bad allergies and a trick back, and he suffered from an acute spiritual malaise. But most of all he lived with the vague sense that he was an inherently flawed human being.

Still, he had always loved his daddy, and he had imagined a relationship with Sweetboy like the one he’d had with his father. He still remembered the picture he’d painted in the fourth grade, a picture his daddy kept on his bedside table until the day his lungs finally filled with blood, and his long and tragic life ended without anybody but Ronnie there to comfort him or take notice.

The painting was of the two of them together—watching a Lions game on television. In the picture they were sitting on the couch, and there were a lot of brown bottles around his daddy. Ronnie was cuddled up next to him, and they were both yelling at the TV. Ronnie had the words inside big balloons, just like they did it in the Sunday morning funnies. “Shit! Damn! Bastard! Cocksuckers!” he wrote, in big bright letters that were surrounded by shining stars and bluebirds. And at the bottom of the painting he wrote, “I love you, Daddy! Go Lions!”

Miss Myers had sent Ronnie directly to the office.

“March your butt down to Mr. Paul’s office,” she said. “And Do Not Pass Go. Do Not Collect 200 Dollars!”

He received a two-week suspension from art class, and they called his daddy out of work to come pick up Ronnie from the office. When Mr. Paul explained the “troubling” nature of the picture, his daddy looked real upset and shook his head at Ronnie in disgust, but when they got in the car he said Mr. Paul was a cocksucker himself, which is probably why he took such offense to the painting. He hugged Ronnie and kissed him on the forehead.

“I love you, Half-pint,” he said. “And I think it’s a real nice picture. It’s not your fault the Lions drive us to such depths.”

He even hung the picture up on the refrigerator, where it stayed for the entire football season, and his daddy made sure it became a constant source of positive reinforcement for Ronnie. Not a day went by that his daddy didn’t say something nice about that picture.

“I like them colors you used,” he said.

“You have a creative talent, Ronnie. Anybody can see that.”

“That couch looks 100 percent realistic. I mean, I might come home and try to sit down on it one day, it looks so real.”

“I believe I’m a touch more handsome than depicted there, but other than that I’d say it’s a very accurate portrayal.”

“Your mom would have liked that drawing too, Ronnie. And if she wouldn’t have left us for that lard-ass Tommy Tupper and his real-estate money, she’d be here to tell you in person.”

“I love you, daddy,” was all Ronnie ever said.

Besides his daddy, Sheila-Ann was the only one who'd ever taken Ronnie's curse seriously. Even Madame Maria, who read tarot cards out at her place on MacDougal Road, said the curse was just his daddy's way of explaining a lifetime of failure and pain.

"There are no curses," said Madame Maria. "There is only love and fear, and your father's curse just allows him to avoid responsibility for his own mistakes in life."

Ronnie could see where she was coming from, but it didn't change the fact that he felt the curse inside him and that it was more real to him than anything else he'd ever known. He remembered the night he told Sheila-Ann about everything, about his father and Louisiana Long and the dead man's hand. He remembered how she hadn't even flinched.

"I'm not kidding," he said. "I'm cursed. It's real."

"I don't care," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I love you."

"I love you too," he said. "But I'm not sure that it matters when it comes to a curse."

"I'm sitting here telling you that it does," Sheila-Ann said. "I'm sitting here telling you that love matters a whole lot more than any hoodoo curse."

Ronnie was in treatment when Sweetboy was born, and he vowed on that night to always do right by his son. Sheila-Ann called after the delivery and told him that they had a happy, healthy baby boy.

"Ten fingers and toes," she said.

"And?" he said.

"And," she said. "No birthmark."

Ronnie wept right there on the phone, and he was so filled up with grace and goodness that he was absolutely convinced that he would never drink or drug again. How could he, after everything he'd been given? And since his release from treatment he'd been doing well. He had had his year chip in a ceramic bowl on top of his dresser, and even if most of it had been spent in jail and treatment, it was still a whole goddamn year without a drink.

"Three hundred and sixty-five days and a thousand nights," his sponsor, Toby, had said.

In treatment they said that relapsing was a process, that it wasn't something that just happened because you had a bad day, or slipped and fell and landed in the bar. The alcoholic mind never stopped working, they said. While you sat in a meeting your disease was in the parking lot doing push-ups—it was patient and persistent, cunning, baffling, and powerful!

Ronnie looked at the glass of vodka on the counter and wished his only problem in the world was booze. If he was just an alcoholic, well there wouldn't be any problem stopping drinking and going on to live a normal and productive life. But what was the point of staying sober when you were cursed? What was the point of any of it when your fate had been decided by a hoodoo gambler on a train bound for Lubbock?

Over the years he'd gone to psychologists and psychiatrists for help. He'd seen faith healers and Buddhist nuns and called television hotlines for salvation. He'd taken magic herbs, gone to sweat lodges, and spiritual retreats. He'd taken part in sacred circles, had his palms read, his runes cast, and his future interpreted by mystics and mediums and shamans and prophets. He'd tried cold, hard logic, meditation, hypnosis, and past-life regression, and had begged several doctors to administer electroshock therapy. Ronnie Courtland had done everything a man could to break a curse, but the truth was he couldn't escape the backlash of his black-magic destiny.

Finally he knew there was nothing left to do but have a gulp of vodka. It was eleven in the morning, and he was cursed and alone and had already ruined his last chance with Sheila-Ann because he slept through the most important appointment of his only son's life. Probably Sheila-Ann would think he'd gotten drunk anyway once she found out about Dr. Amala's.

Ronnie drank the vodka and felt a hot, sweet splash of relief, and then he opened a beer and had a few long, grateful gulps. He poured himself some more vodka and then spotted a pen on the floor, in the dust filled space between the refrigerator and the counter. He repeated the number to the emergency room in his head and was pretty sure he had it. He wrote the number down on a scratch sheet of paper and pinned it with a magnet from Lt. Wang's Wild China Express to the refrigerator.