

Edibility

By Michael Shannon

A three-year-old boy from Minnesota, Timmy, eats a yellow crayon and dies. Not instantly, but hours later. His parents, an hour after they discover their little wonder-of-life drooling what looks like melted butter from his pink lips, dash to the emergency room, claiming tiny Timmy has stomach cramps and shortness of breath.

After maybe ten minutes in the waiting room, they tell the doctor, some young Dude with bold black glasses and a brown goatee, that maybe it was the crayon that gave their Timmy stomach pains, the yellow one he devoured for breakfast.

“You’re not supposed to feed children crayons,” the doctor says. “The economy is tough, but shit—”

“We didn’t,” Dad exclaims, blushing.

But the doctor—Dr. Stevens—is joking. He’s laughing, because it’s all so comical—the parents maybe thinking their precious little oyster is going to croak. Even Timmy, the little brat, actually masticating a crayon is hilarious.

Dr. Stevens is, how we can put it, heartless. Not rot-in-hell heartless. Just been-there-done-that heartless. In medical school, they indoctrinate you to emotionally separate yourself from the patients. So it’s an indifference that must be his façade—a major must.

He’s just trained properly.

“Okay, okay,” Dr. Stevens says, “we’ll have to take some X-rays, just to be sure it’s nothing else.”

The parents want to know, like what else?

Like salmonella. Like Mad Cow. Like a billion latent diseases ready to make a name for themselves and wreak havoc on mankind.

“It could be anything,” Dr. Stevens assures them.

“Anything?”

“Or nothing. I’m not a sage, or a prognosticator. We’ll have to wait and see.”

Timmy’s in the corner of the room, on a table, smiling, his legs dangling off the edge of the bed, swinging back and forth. He has fragments of yellow crayon under his fingernails. His lips are shimmering with what looks like yellow Chapstick.

If there was a photo snapped of Timmy, at that second, it’d look like he’d been eating a daffodil and washing it down with pee.

Dad pats Timmy’s head, mussing his hair, assuring him without words that things will be okay. As

long as Daddy's here, Timmy will forever be okay.

Timmy smiles, and the doctor laughs at the sight of Timmy's slimy yellow teeth.

But the truth is, the parents don't say, is that this isn't the first time Timmy got caught eating crayons.

But the truth is, Timmy can't say, is that the crayons, they taste better than cereal and grilled cheeses and even chocolate ice cream with rainbow sprinkles.

But the truth, Dr. Stevens knows, is that if it's the crayon Timmy ate ... well ... Timmy's screwed. Doc knows damn well this isn't the first time Timothy ate a crayon. Kids will eat damn near anything, and once they're on to something, forget it, it's like weaning an addict off of coke.

Dr. Stevens knows something else, too, and here's the deal: crayons contain mostly paraffin wax and pigment, mixed with a little talc, some perfume, sometimes glitter. That's all cool. Those ingredients are just kosher. But one more, and this is the one Dr. Stevens keeps thinking about—from this lesson he learned six years ago in a pediatric class at Johns Hopkins—crayons contain asbestos, too.

Yeah, asbestos.

And that kills. The same stuff that kills miners, construction workers. Same stuff that kills kids and animals and parents while they sleep, daily.

"Everything should be fine," he assures the parents, trying to assure himself, too.

It will.

It should, at least.

I mean, Dr. Stevens thinks, the asbestos level in crayons is almost zilch, like 0.5 percent, barely lethal.

But today feels different, like maybe something bad could happen. Like maybe this little boy's going to die. Dr. Stevens feels it. The parents, with their stupid faces elongated in dismay, they feel it, too. There's just this odiousness over everything. A big gigantic, yellow cloud of gloom, raining shards of crayon all over this hospital parade.

They take Timmy to the X-ray room.

In two hours, Timmy's going to be gone. No fourth B-day. Nothing. Dead, from an itty-bitty crayon. Actually, many itty-bitty crayons, over time—all that asbestos just being hoarded away amongst his tiny entrails.

The over/under on Timmy's life is like four hours. In two hours, he's going to start vomiting. In three hours, his blood pressure is going to explode, he's going to get rapid heart palpitations, and his temperature is going to sky rocket. And in four hours, his face all lacquered in a dried sheen of sweat,

Timmy is going to be lifeless and turning blue on the table.

Like a light blue crayon.

Dead.

Here one second and gone the next. Just another unfortunate toddler whose cherubic face in the obituary breaks your heart and ruins your breakfast.

Timmy, Timmy, eating those crayons, manufactured by foreign people in a familiar land.

Mom kisses Timmy on the lips. She licks her lips, tasting the wax. She grabs a tissue from a desk and spits into it. She thinks, it's not so bad. Maybe I can see why he eats crayons—why tons of kids eat crayons.

But Mom will live. Her immune system can fight off the toxins. Kids, well, over time, eat enough asbestos, and poof ... gone. Kind of like an alcoholic, when the liver shuts down.

Something always shuts down.

Something always gives.

Children or not; it doesn't matter. You sate your tummy with too much of anything, you're a goner. Food equals obesity equals a heart attack. Cigarettes equals lung cancer equals not a damned chance in hell. You can put a million rosary beads in your hands and kneel in front of a zillion statues of Saints you don't believe in ... it's still over ... you're done.

Guaranteed.

Done like Timmy.

Of course, it's not his fault. You can't make a three-year old culpable for doing something that's almost natural. For kids, objects go directly to mouth, and that's just the way it goes.

No, you can't blame the little brat at all. Maybe blame the parents for being negligent. Maybe the CEOs of the crayon factory for just not giving a shit.

Blame the sun and the moon, too, because it doesn't matter who's guilty. There's no Timmy coming back. Not ever.

It's okay, actually, to throw away those breakfast eggs and push the coffee aside, turn from the obituary section to the sports section, and say, 'The poor kid.'

Because, let's face it, Timmy sure is one unlucky son-of-a-bitch.