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Lovesick: An Original Comic Book

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After three years of art college, I found it difficult to say that I ever fully understood what it felt like to be an artist. In pursuit of that feeling, I promised myself I would create a fully realized, original comic book for my thesis project at the end of my junior year. I decided I would take on the challenge of writing and illustrating it entirely by myself. This because I wanted to discover the feeling in its purest form with the hopes of it slinging me down a pathway to success. One year later, at the precipice of graduation, I completed a 30-page comic book titled *Lovesick*. While I did discover that feeling that I yearned for, it was only after realizing that I was looking for the wrong thing in the wrong place. This paper will discuss my initial intentions with creating *Lovesick*, summarize the story, then go into detail about what I got out of creating the project.



Lovesick, by Sims Vincent. Title page.

Following my decision to make a comic book, I started to brainstorm potential ideas for a compelling original story. While the specifics of the content tended to change overtime, the general premise for *Lovesick* came naturally to me. I knew I wanted to write a story that borrowed elements from my own lived experience, because I understood that tapping into that kind of reflection was ripe for a story with a lot of heart. I also knew that I wanted the comic to be reminiscent of two of my favorite genres in comics: dark action and Shonen manga.

Lovesick is heavily inspired by various American superhero comics of the 90's and the 2000's, but it is illustrated in my personal style which is rooted in techniques found in Japanese manga. One of the primary influences for *Lovesick* is the Todd McFarlane comic series *Spawn*, which started in 1992. The protagonist Spawn acts as a morally flawed and sometimes incompetent hero, which are characteristics I wanted to channel within my own protagonist. McFarlane's art style is also something I take great inspiration from. His proclivity for deep shadows, edgy compositions, and overall attitude saturated page layouts is a style of imagery that I think fits *Lovesick*'s mood and setting perfectly. Examining the similarities between the two, it only makes sense that *Lovesick* occupies the same genre as *Spawn* and other stories like it. That is: dark action comedy. Primarily within the niche of 90's and 2000's comics, other works of the genre include *The Maxx*, *Savage Dragon*, *The Mask*, *Watchmen*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *The Sandman*, *S.C.U.D: The Disposable Assassin*, and *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac*. Privy to the genre are gritty urban settings, morally ambiguous protagonists, dark comedy, grotesque monsters, unstable realities, and heaps of chaotic violence. While all of which are central to *Lovesick*'s voice, what sets it apart is that it is simultaneously artistically influenced by Japanese manga. Not so much in regard to the style of the renderings of characters, but more so in the style of communicating information. For instance, exaggerated facial expressions, floating

symbols meant to convey certain emotions, thin action lines, screen toned panel backgrounds, and segmented paneling that emphasizes movement and impact. Another regular practice in Manga is to feature multiple panels focused on a subject's face, usually for the purpose of displaying a reaction to something in the story. *Lovesick* uses panels like this for the same effect, as well as all of the other previous mentioned methods of communication that are unique to action manga. Furthermore, *Lovesick* is primarily in black and white which is traditional for Japanese manga. Major manga influences for *Lovesick* include *One Piece*, *Full Metal Alchemist*, *Trigun*, *Desert Punk*, *Akira*, *Gantz*, *Berserk*, and *One Punch Man*.

Beyond these inspirations, *Lovesick* utilizes a style that I have uniquely created for the purpose of its story and world. Being an action comedy with themes about corporate control and the occult, I stylize to world of *Lovesick* to reflect the satirical nature of my authoritarian antagonist known as Chaos Corp. I also know that many aspects of my story could be considered pretty edgy or rebellious, so I also wanted to develop a style that purposefully heightened the sense of deviancy and disrespect towards authority. The result is a balance between a demonic and cartoonish aesthetic that forms from expressive characters composed of bold angular lines, and starkly black shadows. A great example of exactly how the style functions within *Lovesick* is found in the characters of the police. They are hefty, horned demon-like creatures who sport gasmasks with big mischievous grins. Their firearms also have grinning faces, so as to hint that their guns have mind of their own. By juxtaposing a goofy, cartoon style with a demonic, monstrous appearance, I am communicating how deeply violent and authoritarian I see institutions like the police, while also poking fun of it with some lighthearted comedy (Fig. 1). This aspect of anti-authoritarianism and making fun of institutions and corporations is a major aspect of *Lovesick* and is something I'll dive into more after explaining the plot.

The story follows the protagonist named Dax. Dax is a 20-year-old who struggles to create a comic of his own after the untimely death of his father. Before dying he urges Dax to never give up on his dreams of creating art. Dax will take his dying message to heart and treat it as an urgent call to action. He drops out of college and isolates himself so that he can fully dedicate himself to making artwork. However, his obsession with pursuing success through the arts in the name of his father leaves him struggling to create anything at all. Dax defines his own worth through his ability to create, and this tense pressure he puts upon himself prevents him from successfully creating anything at all (Fig. 2).

The story kicks off when Dax is approached by a mysterious salesman named Middleman. Middleman works for a supernatural corporation called Chaos Corp, whose mission is to gradually take over the earth and turn it into a giant factory. Exploiting Dax's desperation, Middleman promises him the ability to effortlessly make stunning artwork in exchange for his employment with the evil corporation. Dax agrees and becomes an employee of Chaos Corp. Middleman, however, slyly reveals to Dax after he signs the contract that he now owes Middleman a large sum of money at the end of the month. Failure to pay this debt, means that Middleman will hunt Dax down and eat him alive. Before Dax is able to argue, Middleman departs and leaves him to his initiation into Chaos Corp.

Dax's initiation into the company starts when he is met with a creature resembling a giant eyeball named the Administrator. The Administrator explains Chaos Corp's methods to Dax, particularly what exactly he is meant to be involved with. It is revealed that Dax will travel to a duplicated version of reality known as the mirror world. It is a near exact copy of the city that Dax lives in, but it is twisted, chaotic, and inhabited by monstrous creatures. The administrator explains to Dax that by performing various actions within the mirror world, elements of reality

are able to gradually shift in chaos corps' favor. Dax's job will be visiting the mirror world and completing various tasks so that Chaos Corp's control on reality will gradually grow stronger.

In order to safely explore the mirror world, and properly fend off its demonic inhabitants, the administrator bestows upon Dax a tulpa. A tulpa is a supernatural being that one can form a bond with its users, allowing them to tap into its power and gain special abilities. Dax bonds with a tulpa named Curse, who resembles a ragged voodoo doll. The administrator panics, however, for the curse tulpa is not meant to be given to anyone, for it was banned years ago after it was deemed too dangerous. Before anything can be done, Dax bonds with the tulpa and is flung into the horrors of the mirror world (Fig. 3). There he is met face to face with a plethora of dangerous creatures. One begins to attack him, and so Dax runs into hiding. While hiding Dax awakens his tulpa powers and transforms into Curse. With the ability to unravel the twine and string that now makes up his body, Dax restrains and defeats the attacker.

Throughout the story, Curse and Dax struggle internally over who gets control over their newly shared body. Overpowering Curse for a brief moment, Dax forces them to go into the mirror world version of Dax's apartment. While there he encounters a ghastly husk in place of his mother and discovers that the rooms of the apartment are covered in illustrations of Dax's father. Desiring to leave, Dax finds a way back to reality in the form of a telephone left in his room. After calling a specific number on the phone, he is brought back to reality and finds himself waking up from a slumber over his desk. A comic book is fully completed and laid out below him. The contents display Curse, and some of the creatures he encountered in the mirror world. This will convince Dax that all of the events prior was some kind of fever dream that played through his head as he made this comic. However, after Dax shows the artwork to his mom, the illusion is broken. He gets a call from Middleman, who reminds Dax of the debt that is



Figure 1 – Lovesick, By Sims Vincent. Page 25



Figure 3 - Lovesick, by Sims Vincent. Page 18



Figure 2 - Lovesick, by Sims Vincent. Page 14



Figure 4 - Lovesick, by Sims Vincent. Page 30

due at the end of the month. The story ends with a panel of Dax holding his head in stress, while his mother celebrates his newly created artwork in the background. A text box reads “to be continued” (Fig. 4).

There are two overarching themes that I have deliberately planted into the story of *Lovesick*. The first is my expressions and thoughts about the growing force of authoritarianism in contemporary America, as well as the incomprehensible magnitude of corporate control. *Lovesick* is story about how Dax is exploited by a company who works in the shadows and is hellbent on taking control of the entirety of the human race. This idea in itself is a dramatized and exaggerated version of what I believe it feels like to be an average person in today’s society. One where we all exist at the behest of giant organizations whose motives are so complicated and detached from every life that it is nearly impossible to understand. A growing sense of world ending destruction looms over many people’s futures with the threat of climate change, and with each passing day the rich seem to get richer and the poor poorer. In face of this troubling modern hegemony, reactionary movements seize power in vitally important institutions. Conspiracy theories and misinformation spread across the web like wildfire. All of this, which can be observed day to day in the news headlines, disturbs and angers me greatly. By positioning the thrust of the story around a critique and parody of this concept, I am allowing myself to express my frustrations in an artistic manner. Not only does this make the themes within the narrative seem more genuine, relatable, and important in today’s world, it also saturates it with angst and attitude in a way that I find creatively appealing. My hopes is *Lovesick* can seen as a kind of time capsule for what it felt like to live through this period of time as a young person, and that includes the angst.

The other major theme that exists within *Lovesick* is introspection. I spoke earlier about how I wanted to discover the feeling of being an artist. This is because, much like my character Dax, I place an unhealthy amount of pressure on myself in regards to my art making. I desperately wanted to feel like a real artist so that my journey to becoming a successful one would become clearer. Looking back on this initial motive for making the comic, I can see the emotional weight that the expectation I had set for myself had. This is because at some point my reasoning for making the comic changed. I pitched my idea for the story to my parents, who are directly in the narrative are two important characters. While explain the plot to them, I found myself becoming emotional and crying in front of them. I didn't fully realize until that moment just how much the premise of the story meant to me, and so deeply inspired by that moment I added more to the comic in regard to introspection. It became the central focus of my practice. Rather than making something as a way to reinforce my desire to become a fully-fledged artist, I ended up making something that made me realize that making art was simply not that important in the bigger picture. This revelation may seem surprising, especially because I just made a whole point about wanting to understand what being an artist feels like. To better explain my perspective, I must explain how *Lovesick* relates to my real life.

When I was a teenager, I found out that my dad was diagnosed with a terminal degenerative brain disease known as Frontotemporal Dementia (FTD). It was my understanding that he would die within the next few years, but only after slowly losing his motor functions. I'm happy to say that my dad is a stubborn "son of a gun" who is still alive today despite the doctor's predictions. However, watching him slowly lose his ability to speak and walk took it's tole on me and my family. For me, specifically, this mental tole took the form of an obsession to prove to my father, before his passing, that I was destined for success. This deeply unhealthy pressure that I put upon myself followed me for many years to come, and still exists within me on some

level. So, with this in mind, the promise I made myself to create a fully-fledged comic book was in actuality a goal created out of panic. A panic of graduating and then going nowhere as an artist, disappointing my family and letting down my dad. My quest to understand what it felt like to be an artist, was in really a desperate attempt to force myself down a path of success.

What I find incredibly ironic about all of this, is that at the end of the day I do believe I did discover what it feels like to be an artist. That said, it only became clear to me when I gave up on trying. At some point in writing my story, I started to realize things about myself. These realizations would manifest as elements in the story, which would in turn provide further realizations that would create a feedback loop of reflection and introspection. Suddenly, I didn't care about my original goal, and it became more important for me to write a story that communicated my struggle. To make sense of my own emotions, memories, and personality, and then to organize them into a cohesive piece of art. I found that this story allowed me to make conclusions about life that come directly from processing my struggles, and to my astonishment these conclusions started to aid in the healing of old wounds. *Lovesick* is a story about a kid who struggles to find meaning, purpose, and worth without being able to be a productive artist. Though it's difficult, in fact probably more difficult than anything he's ever had to do in his life, this kid will come to realize that his ability to make artwork has nothing to do with what he thinks it does. Meaning, purpose, worth, and especially love isn't meant to be earned. They simply have to be accepted.

And so, yes, I think I do now know what it feels like to be an artist. It doesn't have anything to do with professionalism, or success. It's about organizing and making sense of one own's experiences in life. It's about diving into the darkest depths of the heart and surfacing with a new outlook. And even if the rest of the world doesn't understand it, to the artist this new

outlook is so blindingly beautiful that it simply must be shared with others. In the case of *Lovesick*, this new outlook and my ability to share it, has gifted me a feeling that I have felt so rarely that I find it incredibly difficult to recognize. That feeling is pride.

I finished a 30-page comic called *Lovesick* for my creative thesis project. It's an action comedy, that borrows aspects from my personal world view, as well as from my lived experience. Making it not only invigorated me with a sense of passion and pride, but it opened doorways for healing deep wounds that were ultimately making me a worse artist. Knowing now that being an artist feels like bearing one's soul to dissection and study in search of inner meaning, I am more excited than ever to continue working on this project and others. My goal from now is on to create stories that push the boundaries of my own understanding of myself. Whether it be the next issue of *Lovesick*, or something brand new, my journey as an artist has only just begun.

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