

# **Cigars for Sawyer**

**Originally included in  
The Memory Eater Anthology**

**By Justin Swapp**



Smashwords Edition

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## Cigars for Sawyer

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I stood alone a long moment in my uncle's majestic hallway, hand hovering over the ornate knob to his study door. Just as I was thinking how old fashioned he had been, my watch vibrated and mother's avatar appeared on the display. With the touch of a button I ignored her. This was the entrance to my uncle's favorite place in the world, quiet and inspiring. I wasn't going to let my mother spoil his memory.

I hadn't been the same since he left us. As if I didn't know, the doctor informed me of a widely accepted practice for removing memories. It would help me cope, he had said, but I knew mother wouldn't stand for an unnatural remedy, especially that one. We played the hand that we were dealt, she always said. I turned the knob.

"You're late," an old man said as I entered the large room I had been in so many times. He was the only person there that I didn't know, and he sat on my uncle's favorite leather chair, behind the executive desk.

"Do you blame me?" I said, probably revealing too much of my ire. "I'm in no hurry to do this."

"Come now, Ben," the man said as he checked off something on a list. "It is Ben, isn't it?" I nodded. "Why don't you sit down?" He motioned to the only free seat among several rows of chairs that had been set up in the room. "My name is Archer Singleton, and I will be conducting this meeting."

With a nod, I sat down between my cousins Jared and Scott on the front row. They actually seemed excited to be there. It had been years since I had seen them. They were there with their families, of course. Too bad it took this to get everyone together.

"What do you think you'll get?" Jared asked across me before I could greet them properly. The murmur in the room picked up.

"The plane, I hope," Scott said picking a piece of lint off his sweater. "I'm pretty confident. He knew I was working on my pilot's license."

Mr. Singleton cleared his throat. "Your attention, please." The noise level gradually settled down. "As you all know, we are gathered here today to settle the estate of one Mr. Charles Xavier."

"He went by Chuck," I said irritably.

Someone shushed me from behind.

"Let's begin then, shall we?" Mr. Singleton said giving me a quick, sideward glance.

"Here we go," Jared whispered, crossing his fingers. He started bouncing his leg.

"To my dearest Jacqueline," Mr. Singleton read, "It's time to put the top down, and feel the wind in your face again. Enjoy." Mr. Singleton held up the keys to Chuck's 2020 Lexus Hindsight, a classic racing machine. "Sign here, please," Mr. Singleton said holding up an old Mont Blanc pen he pulled out of a drawer.

My aunt hustled up to the desk, her high heels clicking every step of the way. "Where?" she said, examining the desk, only to come up looking confused. "Where's the hand scanner?"

"The instructions were to use pen and paper," Mr. Singleton said.

It took her a moment, but she finally signed the document. Swiping the keys out of Mr. Singleton's hand, she took a deep breath, straightened her shirt, and walked slowly back to her seat.

It went on like this for a while. The Segway went to Uncle Henry, the house to Grandma Elsie, and the timeshare to my second cousin Brad. I stopped paying attention after hearing a few relatives behind me whisper that the will had been tampered with. I just wanted to leave, and put this all behind me. Uncle Xavier did indeed give the plane to Scott, but with one stipulation. He had to finish college first, which upset Scott enough that he tried to work a trade for the timeshare.

"Thank you all for your time," Mr. Singleton concluded.

I got up to leave, but couldn't help thinking how much I had loved this place once. Now, I wanted nothing more than to get as far away from it as possible. It hurt a little that uncle Chuck hadn't thought of me in his will, but I was mostly irritated with the family. The funeral had been enough to deal with. Everyone's pretense, and outward sorrow. Today made it clear, though. They had just been posturing. All they really cared about was what Chuck could give them.

"One moment," Mr. Singleton said as he scanned the document again. "My apologies. It seems as though there has been a slight oversight."

A murmur brushed across the attendees. Jacqueline quickly stuffed the keys she had just been waving around down the front of her blouse.

"I apologize," Mr. Singleton started. "Apparently in my old age, my eyesight fails me." He lifted a pair of glasses that hung around his neck, up over the bridge of his nose.

"It would seem that there is a hand-written addendum to the will," he brought the page up to his face, "complete, of course, with Mr. Xavier's initials."

"What does it say?" Jared asked not even trying to hide his enthusiasm. He hadn't received anything.

"To Ben Wright, the son I never had," Mr. Singleton stopped a moment to swallow, "I give my collector's tobacco box, a token to remember me by."

To remember him by? That hurt, I thought. How was I supposed to deal with his memory now? Erasing it was off the table. He wanted me to remember him. Could I dishonor a dying man's wish?

Mr. Singleton swiveled in the chair, and examined the library wall behind the desk. There were books, works of art, and various antiques on the shelves between the novels and other things.

"Ah, here we are."

He removed a dark wooden box from under a few books. It was almost as if the box had been hidden. Chuck never did like to let people see him smoke. It embarrassed him.

"Just sign here," Mr. Singleton said as I approached the desk. I signed apprehensively.

Why would he have given me a tobacco box? I didn't smoke, and the family suspected that this was what finally killed Uncle Chuck.

That was it. The group disbanded quickly, apparently now with no reason to stay. I waited behind as Mr. Singleton put the signed papers in his brown leather brief case, and then snapped it shut.

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"Did you know him?" I said.

"No, but I've heard of him for sure," he said as he finally put his brief case on the desk, and paused to look me in the eye. "Why?"

I rolled the tobacco box over. "It's just that he was a thoughtful man," I said weighing the gift in my hands. "I'm just wondering why he would give me this."

"I take it, then, that you're not a smoker" he said with a smirk. When I didn't laugh he continued. "Look, Ben, I don't know. I'm sorry. Perhaps a look inside will tell you more." He patted me on the shoulder, grabbed his brief case, and with a slight limp left the room.

I sat down on his leather chair, placed the collector's box on top of the great big desk, and stared at it a while. It had never been opened. There was a great big wax seal on the side of the box with his initials embossed. Chuck was always doing oddities like that - using wax seals in a day and age where you could wipe clean the slighted thought. I chuckled at his memory, but couldn't bring myself to open it.

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The next day was difficult, not just because I had had a hard time sleeping, but because I was in no condition to go to work, especially my line of work. Typically I liked my job. In fact, I loved it. Working as an orderly at Second Chance Hospital had always been inspiring. But I think that was the problem. For the first time, I didn't feel inspired.

Distracted and preoccupied, I couldn't stop thinking about Uncle Chuck, or about that odd tobacco box. The gift made so little sense that it pried at my mind throughout the day. I didn't collect things, and I definitely didn't smoke. I thought Uncle Chuck knew me better than that. He had been like a father to me. The urge to just erase it all swelled in me. I knew I could, but my mother's words haunted me, and now his words did too. I felt preoccupied, and that made me feel guilty; I should have been thinking of my patients, especially, Sawyer.

I clocked in near the entrance, bending slightly at the knees in front of the retinal scanner, and started my rounds. As an orderly it was my duty to ensure my patients' safety, comfort, and when possible, progress with their conditions. First on the schedule was Mr. Ferguson. I got him up and dressed in time for his exams, though I couldn't tell you what they were for. I normally could. Mrs. Jefferson forgot how to use silverware again so I tried to teach her. I ended up feeding her breakfast and then handing her off to Suzanne for bathing.

Sawyer was slated for physical therapy that afternoon. When the time came, I knocked on his door out of courtesy, but knew he wouldn't say anything. He would sit on his bed, staring at the ground, waiting for me. That's what he always did.

We had a certain connection that I couldn't quite explain. Sawyer was my favorite patient. Perhaps because of his condition, or because he needed me more than the others, though recently I felt like it was me that needed him. Among other things, I had taken to telling him about my feelings since Uncle Chuck died.

I cracked the door and poked my head in. "Sawyer," I said cheerfully, "may I come in?"

I entered, of course, without waiting for a response. I wouldn't get one.

The room was pretty bare, as one might expect. There was a mirror, a desk, and a bed upon which Sawyer sat. My guess was that he was probably around thirty-five, but I never had the heart to ask him. He sat up straight and stiff on the edge of the bed, his legs long enough to touch flat on the floor. He didn't move much, except for his eyes. They watched me affably.

"Sawyer," I said as I sat down next to him on the rickety bed and put my arm around his shoulder. His attentive eyes tracked me the whole way. "Are you ready for your therapy today? We're going to stretch --"

He lifted his arm slightly toward the desk revealing a curled hand.

"You want the radio?" I said with a smile, shaking my head. "Okay. I should have known. You always want music, don't you?"

I walked over to the desk and flipped a switch on the old alarm clock radio. It was already set to Sawyer's favorite classical station. Instantly the room was enveloped in soft music. The piano's methodical melody contrasted with a verbose violin instantly made me moody.

To get ready for his walk around the hospital, I had to stretch Sawyer out. Lifting his foot I began extending his leg like I always did. I started at the foot, and worked my way up to the calf.

"They read the will yesterday," I said, picking up our conversation where we had left it last time. "It was really depressing to see the rest of the family grovel over his possessions."

Then, I elevated his leg and --

Sawyer grunted.

I glanced up to see Sawyer lifting his curled hand toward the desk again.

"What is it?" I said, confused, lowering his leg. This wasn't the routine.

He stared intently at the desk, raising his eyebrows slightly.

I followed his gaze trying to understand what he wanted. "A different station?" I asked, but his eyes shifted back to mock me.

I looked again. "Oh, do you want this?" I approached the desk and picked up a pencil and a notepad, and held them up for him to see. When his eyes widened, I sat back down, and laid the notepad in his lap, and the placed pencil in his hand.

He wrote slowly. The handwriting was so messy that I couldn't understand what he had written. When I did I swallowed hard.

Kill me.

I shot up, shocked.

"What?" I said ripping the note from the pad of paper, and crumpling it up all in one motion. I didn't know how to process what had just happened. "How could you say that to me, Sawyer? You're my friend, and you know that my uncle just... died."

His eyes pled with me, but I shook it off.

Then, as if I suddenly came to my senses I yanked the sharp pencil from his hand too. He blinked hard.

"Look," I said, running a hand through my hair, "I'll have Suzanne come by and finish working with you today, Okay? I... I've got to go."

I ran out of the room, stopping only to relay to Suzanne that something had happened, and that I needed to go home. She expressed understanding, like always, and agreed to care for Sawyer in my stead in exchange for dinner and a movie.

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When I arrived at my apartment I slammed the door behind me and flopped down on my cheap twin bed, sulking. I wanted to cut out my memories, and start over. It was a perfectly accepted practice, after all. Of course, the Memory Eater's track record wasn't without flaw, but what technology was? I could erase Uncle Chuck, and Sawyer too; I would just have to deal with mother's hate for the device.

I couldn't believe Sawyer would say that to me. Had I failed him somehow? I had thought we were making progress, that he was making progress, but as I considered it further I realized that the signs were there.

I rolled over, and saw the tobacco box on my nightstand, then flipped back on to my other side. In the last session I had had with Sawyer before today he had scribbled a note that he felt worthless, and unproductive. I tried to use humor with him to brush it off, thinking he was just having a bad day. But then I had to convince him to do his physical therapy, which, come to think of it, I never had to do. He had always been so motivated. I've been told that before his accident he had been very athletic, and that he had a bright future working with my uncle at the University. Now he had been rendered a shadow of his former self. For months I asked what had happened to put him in the hospital, but no one would talk. It was strange. Like everyone knew but me.

Putting the tobacco box out of my mind was more difficult than I had thought. The seal made me think of my uncle's way. He was old fashioned, and thoughtful. I mean, who uses wax seals on anything anymore? We lived in a world of bar codes, and microchips, but Uncle Chuck uses wax seals. It was the novelty in it, I supposed, kind of like the cigars. You use cigars to celebrate.

Sitting up, I kicked my legs over the bed and picked up the box, and set it on my lap. The box was polished, and made of fine quality wood. It smelled slightly sweet, and inviting.

If uncle chuck had given me the box, he would have wanted me to open it, wouldn't he? Then why the seal? I had initially told myself that it was a collector's item, and that he would have wanted me to keep it in mint condition. Maybe he thought I could sell it for a good price. No, he would have just given me the money.

I grabbed a pen from the night stand, and tried to run it underneath the wax seal, but the pen broke. I lifted the box so I could take a closer look. While the seal had looked like wax, upon further examination it seemed to actually be metallic. It was only made to look like wax. I also noticed that just

below each of my uncle's initials were two oval depressions that, now that I noticed them, just seemed to be out of place.

On a whim, I placed a thumb in each one, more to measure them than anything, and something happened. A thin band of white light appeared behind my thumbs and ran across the depressions, finishing with an electronic whirring, and finally, a click. The seal separated.

Now that seemed a little more like my uncle. Charles Xavier was a modern day renaissance man.

I lifted the lid, still marveling at the curious little box, and wondering why my uncle left it to me. The sweet smell of tobacco quickly filled my room as I laid eyes on the top row of cigars that populated the box. I had never smoked before, but the smell was alluring.

I picked up a plump cigar, weighed it in my hand, and ran it under my nose. Then, I felt silly. My uncle had really just left me a bunch of cigars, hadn't he? There was nothing to remember him by, certainly nothing to celebrate.

Irritated again, I put the cigar back in the box, and in that moment I realized that something was off. For a split second I thought that I had noticed an oddity, just underneath where my cigar had been.

I removed my cigar again, and then another, and another. With the top layer of cigars gone, I could clearly see some type of black slate where the wooden bottom of the tobacco box should have been. It seemed like a portable device of sorts, and what was stranger, it seemed familiar.

I reached in the box, and gently lifted out the shiny black slate. I set it on my lap, rotated it, and flipped it over, trying to find any distinguishing features along its smooth, onyx-like surfaces.

After tinkering with the slate for a few minutes I gave up, and set it on the bed. I proceeded to pick up the cigars, and put them back into the box when my apartment door buzzed.

I made my way to the door, and activated its display, grateful for some kind of distraction. "Hello dear," my mother said getting too close to the camera outside the entrance to the building. "I haven't seen you for several weeks."

"You should have been in attendance yesterday, Mom," I said. "Your brother died for heaven's sake."

"You know how I felt about your uncle," Mother said dismissing my comment. "Now let me up dear, so we can visit please. We have much to discuss."

Then, I heard a noise from somewhere behind me that sounded like a TV. The thing is, I didn't own one.

I looked back, and there, on my bed, the black slate whirred, and flickered. An impatient looking image of my uncle's face projected a foot or so above the slate. Then I heard his voice.

"Ben. Let's begin."

I turned back to the display and stepped to the side to better block the camera just as my mother spoke. "Ben, what is that behind you? Is someone in your apartment? Is it... a girl?"

"Uh, Mom," I hesitated, absorbing the surprise in her voice. "Now's not really a good time." She lifted a playful eyebrow, and I turned off the display.

The door display buzzed again as I bounded back to my bed.

"Uncle Chuck?" I said desperately as I knelt next to the strange device, but the hologram was gone.

"Don't leave me again," I mumbled as I buried my face in my bedding. I didn't think I'd be able to handle this, not again. He was just here. I would erase it all, just to spite mother. Didn't think I could have a girl in here? I thought I might just erase her too.

Then I heard a strange bleeping sound, and looked up. The black slate came alive again, this time with vibrant teal text intended for me. It was my uncle. He had left me some kind of instructions.

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I didn't sleep much that night, not after reading what Uncle Chuck had left behind for me. I spent

the evening deciphering his directions, and the early hours of the morning trying to comprehend the device, or, version two, as he called it. It was a slippery proposition, this scheme of his. The man was a genius in many ways, but perhaps a little cracked too. Were they all like that?

I watched the sun rise via the display in my kitchen. Work started in an hour, and I had to face Sawyer again one way or another; whether I would go through with my uncle's plan, or not.

The shower felt good, but I got dressed a little slower than normal. I wasn't worried about work. They understood that working with these kinds of patients was trying, so their policy on personal days was pretty lenient. As a matter of fact, no one even mentioned anything to me about running out of there yesterday.

I approached Sawyer's door with trepidation. It didn't have to be Sawyer, I supposed, but given yesterday, he made the most sense. I didn't even know if this was going to work.

"Sawyer," I said, as I knocked softly on his door. I entered, backpack slung over my shoulder. Sawyer sat on his bed in the same position as yesterday. It was as if he hadn't moved.

"I'm sorry for running out on you yesterday," I said, as I put my backpack down on his bed. "That just freaked me out, you know?"

Sawyer lifted his hand slightly and nudged at his desk. "The paper and pencil?" I said walking to the desk to collect them. As soon as I gave them to him, he started writing.

"Have you considered it?" he wrote.

"I've been thinking about it all night," I said.

"You'll do it then?" Sawyer wrote excitedly.

"What I meant was that I couldn't sleep," I said. "I was hoping that a good night's sleep would set you straight."

"I want to be productive again," he wrote hastily, "even if that means on the other side."

I considered that statement for a moment. I wondered what his beliefs had taught him, and how his convictions would allow for him to do what he was suggesting.

"I won't kill you Sawyer," I said.

Instantly his eyes fell, followed by his countenance. He started to scribble some angry things, how I didn't know what it was like, and how I would want the same if I were in his shoes.

"Relax," I said, grabbing his writing hand. "Let me explain."

He looked up at me, the hope drained from his face.

"I won't kill you, Sawyer. But, I have another idea."

I asked him if he had ever heard of the Memory Eater and if he knew what it did. He seemed to take an unusually long time to respond. I thought that perhaps he was fatigued. He had done more writing today than he had done all last week.

"Yes," he wrote finally.

I repeated that I wouldn't kill him, but that if he would give me permission, I could do something revolutionary, and almost as good. It just wouldn't haunt my conscience the same.

Sawyer gave his approval, nodding his head like I had never seen before.

Sitting down on the bed next to him, I unzipped the backpack, and removed the tobacco box and placed it between us. Most people wouldn't have noticed his expression, but I could tell Sawyer was confused.

"I'll explain shortly," I said reassuringly.

As I removed the cigars, I prayed the instructions my uncle had left me would be sufficient for me to accomplish the task properly. I took out the black slate.

Tapping the corner of the slate caused various lights to display on the once black surface. A hologram of a generic human head appeared several feet above the device.

"Now Sawyer, I'm going to regulate the process from the control panel here," I said, pointing at the panel of light that appeared just in front of me and a foot away from the tablet from which it was emitted. "Okay?"



Sawyer looked at me intently a moment, and then nodded.

Using my thumbs and index fingers, I rotated a pair of virtual dials on the illuminated panel in front of me until the mannequin-like hologram moved on to Sawyer's face perfectly, leaving a grid of teal lines across the surface of his head. I couldn't help but think that he looked like a patient who had been prepped for plastic surgery.

Next, I did as the instructions had indicated. Pushing a green slider on the panel of light caused a small module to eject from the far side of the slate. I reached over and pulled it from device, examining it closely.

The memory module's small purple button was exactly where it was supposed to be. Pushing it resulted in the expected self-diagnostic procedure, a progress bar, and ending, finally, in a bright green check mark, completing the validation process.

"I want you to know Sawyer," I said as I replaced the memory module, "that I consider you a friend. Thanks for always listening, and understanding."

He nodded, and stared at the mirror across the room.

The slate finished loading the memory module, indicated by a friendly chime, and as it did, the grid-like hologram started to change. Sawyer winced, and then he moaned. The teal lines shaping the generic head slowly wavered and then shifted, transforming each vertex until it was familiar to me.

The hologram looked like my uncle.

Sawyer's eyes widened and he gasped as he gazed at the mirror. He almost looked shocked. I assumed it was because he felt some final sensation from the procedure.

The slate reproduced its familiar chime again, and the hologram disappeared instantly. "Sawyer?" I said as he just stared at the mirror. He didn't respond, but his lip began to quiver.

Had I mishandled the procedure? Worried, I fired up the slate again to review the instructions. I wanted to validate that I hadn't killed two people that day.

"You did it," said Sawyer.

I fell off the bed.

He said it like he was trying to convince himself. He rubbed his face with his hands, suddenly functional, like normal. "What I mean is, of course you did."

I picked myself up, and got to my feet. I was unaccustomed to hearing anyone speak in this room besides me.

"Sawyer?"

"No, son," he said as he stood up and stretched, "it's me."

"Uncle Chuck?" I said, my voice trailing to a whisper, "Is it really..."

"I must say that your choice in candidates feels a little kismet." He sighed, and reached inside the tobacco box and retrieved a cigar. "Fitting, nonetheless."

"I... It just happened that way," I said, scratching my head, still not believing that I was actually talking to my uncle. "I had this patient, and he, well, he didn't want to go on--"

"That will do," he said, raising a hand. "Did you bring the lighter?"

I fished around one of the pouches in my backpack, removed the lighter, and handed it to him.

"Normally I would use my V Cutter," he said examining the cigar just before he bit the end off, "but this will have to suffice, given the circumstance."

"What happened to Sawyer?"

"Ben," he said before lighting the cigar, taking a few choppy drags, and smacking his lips. "All I know is that today, you are forever part of history. Erasing is old hat. You have brought a man back from the dead using a backup of his memories. The theory that--"

"--a man is merely the sum of his experiences." I finished his sentence, not sure what this meant. I felt a little conflicted, to be honest, now that the deed was done.

"Aren't you happy to be back?" I said. "You haven't smiled."

"Haven't I?" he said. "Interesting. I'll make note of that."

"What's on the other side?" I said, leaning in a little over the bed. I couldn't help myself. What would you ask someone who had been dead?

"I don't know," he said as he took a long drag on the cigar, and blew a smoke ring, "This version of me consists of my memories before I died."

"Sawyer was convinced there was something on the other side."

A knock came from the bedroom door.

"Ben, are you in there?" It was my mother. How did she get back here?

Uncle Chuck sat down on the bed quickly. He put out the cigar in the tobacco box and resumed his prior hospitalized posture.

"Mom, you can't be here," I said shooting to my feet, but that didn't stop her from barging into the room. "How did you-"

"You can't keep avoiding me, Ben. I'm your mother," she said as she waved a gloved hand, a Coach handbag dangling from her arm. "Are you... smoking in here?"

"How did you get in here?"

"A very nice orderly, Suzanne I think her name was, let me in," she said. "She ignored me at first, but then I told her I was your mother and she told me where you were straight away."

"Mom, you can't be here."

As if she had just waved the smoke away, she saw Sawyer, and her mouth gaped open a moment.

"Five minutes, Ben. We need to discuss your uncle."

"Okay," I said, sitting back down next to Uncle Chuck, trying not to look at him. I knew better than to try to get out of a conversation like this, now that she had me. It would just take longer.

"You've been frustrated with me. Your uncle and I had a falling out," she said as she pulled out the desk chair, and sat down. "I want you to know why."

"It was his work, Mom, I know," I said, afraid the frustration would come out in my voice.

"Ah, yes, the mighty inventor's work. I know first-hand how the wrongful application of technology can destroy people, Ben. It all started with the first of your uncle's many patients."

"Okay," I said, curiously.

"A bright young man, a lot going for him. He was star-struck with your uncle, what with his Nobel Prize for the Memory Eater and all. He was really a father figure. So, when the time came to volunteer for the first round of memory removals, he did so readily, with perfect faith. After all, everyone has something to remove, right? At least that was the pitch. But it all went wrong."

"Something in version one caused his muscles to seize up, and to render his voice box constrained, and unusable." She stared at me blankly for a moment.

"It wasn't until version 1.5 that the system became stable, and public. But, at what cost? The damage to Sawyer Wright was done, and irreparable." She swallowed hard.

"Wright?" I said, my interest peaked. I wasn't quite sure what she was saying, and it must have shown on my face because she clarified.

"You had a brother, Ben," she said sitting up stoutly, holding back the tears.

"But, I don't have a brother."

It was then that she cried.

THE END