



STORIES FROM THE
END OF THE WORLD

WICKED
SHADOW
Press

APOCALYPTALES

THE END IS NIGH

EDITED BY PARTH SARATHI CHAKRABORTY

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DEDICATION

**In homage to the unwavering, ever-resilient
human spirit that prevails undiminished,
even in the face of impending doom.**



PAINTING: THE GREAT DAY OF HIS WRATH
BY JOHN MARTIN



THE MIND IS ITS OWN PLACE, AND IN ITSELF
CAN MAKE A HEAV'N OF HELL, A HELL OF HEAV'N.

JOHN MILTON, PARADISE LOST



THE GLANCING

JOANNA GALBRAITH

Zale didn't mind the night sweats. The way the dampness settled in the nape of his neck and then seeped into his hair like roots of a thirsty tree. In his dreams it felt like swimming, The way Grandmother had once described it.

“A drinking of the skin. Submersion in cool velvet.”

Zale had never swum. No boy ever had. Not since the sun had evaporated the sea, blanching all the whales and the bones they had once swum in.

At breakfast, Cousin Rana marveled over his complexion.

“How do you do it, Z? So fresh. So soft. It’s like you were born this morning or something.”

Rana was only six years older than him, but her skin spoke in decades.

Zale shrugged and continued his breakfast. It was almost a sin to speak while eating. Masticating required moisture, and moisture was sacred.

“He’s young. Leave him be,” shouted Grandmother from the porch.

“But Ripley’s younger still and her skin ain’t half as sweet!” Zale glanced across at his little sister chewing blankly on a slice of bread. Her face was already weathered, little creases around her sunken eyes. He pushed his watermelon juice over to her. She needed it more than him.

“Luck, I suppose,” Grandmother shouted back.

“I should be so,” huffed Rana.

Zale heard Grandmother tut as she swept down the front porch. She didn’t approve of vanity, not anymore. The Glancing had seen to that among many other things. But she wasn’t completely without grasp. She understood why Rana cared so much about her looks. Somehow, the girl had managed to attract the eye of a local Councilor. *Somehow* sounded ungenerous; Rana did have straight teeth. It wasn’t serious at this stage but being favoured by a politician was like being favoured by the whole State.

“Enough about Zale’s skin. We’ve all got work to do.”

*

Grandmother’s farm was the largest in the area. Not many animals, not like before. A few dusty hens scratching around in the grit. A couple of camels. They lasted the best. A desiccated-looking dog, tongue always to the earth. They had given up on growing things. Boring water was now their thing. Grandfather had struck it lucky — twice — in the months after The Glancing. First by even surviving it: he and his entire family. Hunkering down in a shelter originally intended for hurricanes, carefully equipping it with everything: space blankets, ventilators, three

generators, water, whiskey, tinned peas, pasta, corn chips, and gauze. Then, in the aftermath, while the sun was still receding like a tossed ember, he had been fortunate again — happening upon a truck with a water-boring machine. The owner had died next to it, lost all his skin. No theft in death, Grandfather had said. But then his luck had ended as quickly as it had begun. A heart attack while out excavating, face caked in red loam — leaving Grandmother as the matriarch of all that he owned.

*

These days Grandmother found farm life harder than she remembered. Hunting for subterranean waterways was grinding, and often in vain. All that digging for the smallest trickle; leaving everyone with parched skin and mouths ribbed like cathedral vaults. Except for Zale, who constantly looked as if he had been caught out in a rainstorm. She did her best to keep him from the heaviest work. Not just because of his disposition, an almost nectarous display of sweetness which tended to jar with the other men, but she could hardly have the boy sweating while none around him ever did. Once he had cut himself while using a sawing blade. Blood spurting out like raindrops, him bottling his tears. She had bundled him away quickly, scuffing the blood into the dust. Most folk when they cut themselves didn't bleed anymore. A sludgy goop would appear instead. It was still blood, of course, they were humans after all. But blood was no longer a liquid, it tended to move more like lava. Strokes were frequent, deaths even more so, especially in the early days. These days they had pills to make things flow again. But Zale still bled like they had before The Glancing.

She watched the boy from the porch as he passed by after breakfast. His hair had spiked up overnight.

"You've been swimming in bed again?" she hissed.

Zale nodded, guilty. How did she even know?

"Right, then you will need to go tend the outer fields. Disappear for a few days, Check for vegetation. You know the drill."

Zale pouted but only fleetingly. He loathed the outer fields, everybody did. Nothing but cindered hills and the rambling bones of for-

gotten men. But he knew Grandmother only ever sent him there to protect him from himself.

“I want you gone in half an hour. Take that hound of yours for company,” her voice trailed off, a sudden brume of dust in the opposite direction catching her eye. The Water Board had come. She spat into the ground and watched the nip of precious fluid foam at her feet. She could be arrested for such waste.

“What they be wanting,” she muttered, kicking dust over her transgression.

The Water Board came every month to check for irregularities; pilfering, diluting, selling at disputed margins. Grandmother kept her records straight enough, but she didn’t trust their end. In the early days there had been endless scandals. Water rations stolen from the infirmed, the marginalized, the old; those with little chance of contributing to the new order. A corrupt Governor had been the culprit, redirecting the pipes, but The Water Board had been acquiescent, never uttering a word.

Nowadays the rumours were all about top-level scientists—latching onto the idea of human water. Water and a bit of gristle, the richest ones a layer of blubber.

Grandmother had heard folk talking about it down at the water depot.

“They’re purging the towns,” one man said.

“Who are?” replied another.

“Clandestine units. Sweeping the streets in the middle of the night. Abducting the homeless, the orphans, the misfits. People who won’t be missed. But people *are* missing them.”

“Yes,” interrupted another woman younger than both men. “They say they’re draining them of water. The little they have left.”

“Where’s the proof?”

“That’s just the thing. There isn’t any. No one has ever lived to confirm it.”

“Or deny it, I suppose.”

“Pah!” Grandmother responded. The new world was ugly enough without such needless gabble.

She watched as The Water Board truck careened into the yard, kicking up the dust so the chickens began to cough. One of the truck's occupants was Rana's Councilor, rubbing his thighs as he exited the vehicle and then using the friction to spruce up his hair. He checked his appearance twice in the side mirror. Now she understood where Rana got her vanity from.

"Councilor," she nodded before turning to his companions.

"You're early for this month."

"Heard you had some luck."

"Sure, down on Bessie's mount. Not the vein we were hoping for but certainly a good flow. Sent you all the documents already."

The white coats examined their papers and agreed that this was so.

"Zale must be getting bigger now," one of them said.

Grandmother scowled though she hid it well enough. "Strong enough, I suppose. Little clumsy, though. Can't trust him with a needle, let alone an axe."

"He about?"

"No, not now. Sent him out on errands. Be gone a few days. What you be wanting with him, anyway?"

"Nothing of consequence, might have some publicity work for him. Councilor here says he's quite the looker."

Grandmother squinted. "Rana not enough for you, sonny?"

The Councilor remained unmoved, but the white coats bristled immediately.

"No, mam. Our Councilor here is a straight up fella. Just passing on a compliment, tis all."

"Be sure to let him know."

Grandmother scowled again as the truck screeched away. Perhaps it might be better if Rana let that Councilor go. It wasn't like the old days. Not anymore.

*

Twenty-six years had passed since then. Early seconds really if the Bible were even half true. No one had predicted it, not even the astronomers. *Stars explode all the time*. Except this one hadn't really ex-

ploded as much imploded all of space. Fireballs of gas ricocheting around the solar system until one hit the sun. *Bang!* Set her off like a raging pinball, engulfing Mercury whole. Mars and Venus, too. Earth hadn't been struck but the sun had come close enough to scold the surface, sucking all the water from her face. Peeling the skin off the living creatures who hadn't burrowed their way into darker soils. The immediate shock had worn off now, but humans had changed. Walking the earth like spent cicada shells. Crackling like potato crisps when they bent down on their knees. That's why Zale was so different, so precious in a way. Before The Glancing, he wouldn't have been. His skin would have been like any other boy his age. Greasy, a little pock marked. Sliding towards manhood. But now he stood out and Grandmother had no clue as to why he did. One of those inexplicable things, she supposed. Like why some people were clever and others born like wooden blocks. She had heard stories about some wet-skinned folk living up the north. All gone now, though. 'Disappeared,' some folk said. She wondered about his mother. Perhaps she had been special, too. Not special enough. Both she and Zale's father had been killed in a car accident eight years ago. Seemed a careless way to die after surviving a vengeful sun.

She watched as the truck disappeared behind the copper hills. Drumming up the earth again. Why did they create so much more filth than anyone else?

The Councilor, meanwhile, was still watching Grandmother from his car window. He caught a glimpse of himself in the reflection and frowned. He looked like one of those Palmyra dates you found in the desert. Creviced and dirty. He would need a fresher complexion to climb up the Government tree.

"Pull over, would you?"

He could see Rana in a nearby field, helping Ripley drag some sacks.

"Hi gorgeous," he shouted.

Rana loved it when he said that.

"Seen that cousin, Zale, of yours anywhere?"

Her smile drooped rapidly into a pout. He hadn't stopped just for

her.

“This morning at breakfast.”

The Councilor handed Ripley a bullet-hard orange from his well-rubbed pocket.

“Well, he’s not there now,” he said pinching the little girl’s cheek. The child brushed his hand aside but kept hold of the orange.

“How should I know where he’s gone. I’m not his keeper, you know.”

Rana hated it when the Councilor didn’t pay her sufficient attention. It was bad enough at home.

“Steady there. A man can ask his girl how her family is, can’t he?”

Rana felt immediately chastised. He was an important man. She should be more grateful. “Sometimes Grandmother sends him to the outer fields to check on the posts,” she volunteered.

“I see,” said the Councilor, gesturing at the driver to start the engine. “Can we give you a lift back home?”

Rana shook her head. They weren’t in any hurry. Grandmother always had a new job for them there.

“Ok then. Don’t forget to take your vitamins, sweetheart. Keep that pretty face of yours extra bright.” He tossed her a half empty jar of *lutein & zeaxanthin extra* – these were hard to come by. Rana blushed while Ripley made a sick sign behind her back.

#

Zale made a campfire in a dip between two dust hills and cooked himself some beans which tasted of wearied earth. He was used to being on his own. Grandmother had raised him that way, but he missed Ripley and her hopeful banter about the day the rains would come. His dog, Gringa, joined him in the dusk shadows and the two of them counted the stars, the few of them which remained. He wasn’t expecting any company and was surprised to see a truck suddenly swerve down between the two hills.

“You Zale?” shouted the driver. He was wearing a policeman’s cap.

Zale nodded though his dog woofed *no*, and the man nodded

back. "Got yourself a smart hound there, boy."

The policeman got out of the car and started whistling at Gringa, but the dog retreated behind Zale's legs.

"Sorry son, but the dog needs to come with me. Saw you giving her a bowl of water. That's a direct violation, you know. Water is for human consumption only, except for working dogs."

"But she is a working dog."

"Not out here, she ain't."

The policeman strode over with a chain. Zale could feel Gringa cowering. She knew when things weren't right.

"Run, girl. Run!" he shouted, shoving her towards the hills.

The policeman made a half-hearted attempt to catch the dog before returning to strike Zale hard across the face. The boy tasted blood in his mouth so he washed his tongue over his teeth just as Grandmother had taught him.

"Councilor said you might be trouble," grunted the policeman as he began dragging the boy to his truck.

"Where're you taking me?"

"To fill out the violation paperwork, Actions have consequences, boy."

Zale sulked in the passenger side, trying not to cry. He could see Gringa in the distance; her paws scattering earth to sky.

*

Ten days had passed and there was still no sign of Zale. It was unusual. He normally slunk back in after five days all supple-skinned and grateful. But this time, he had not come, only his dog. Grandmother sent a farnhand out to search for him, but he had found only a campsite, ashes still smoldering. Not that this meant much. Embers burned on far longer than humans ever did.

"I saw some tire marks nearby."

"They ours?" she asked.

"Could be."

"Strange," said Rana unhelpfully. "He's such a homebody most of the time."

The next morning Grandmother stuck up signs on all the fence

posts. People did it when folk went missing, although usually they were too late. She knew this, and yet it seemed odd no one had seen him. Not even a body. Normally they lay strewn for days, cotton-mouthed and withered.

“Don’t worry.” said Rana. “I’ll ask about in town. He’s bound to show up soon.”

Grandmother growled her thanks.

Rana would do anything to avoid a bit of real graft.

*

The television always stuttered for a minute when Grandmother turned it on. Like it was deciding whether to bother. Rana said they should get a new one but the old one worked just fine. Money didn’t need to be wasted on such things. It needed to be saved for the day when the water finally stopped running. She could see Rana’s Councilor being interviewed — announcing his plans to run for Governor. He looked effervescent, she decided. There was a word she hadn’t used for a long time.

The door slammed behind her.

“Grandmother, I have news.”

“I know. I’ve just seen it.”

“No, not that. *This*”

Rana thrust her hand into the woman’s face. Fingers glistening, even wet. There was a diamond on the left. Grandmother snatched the girl’s hand. It slid across her own. She turned back towards the television. The Councilor was still on. Basking in his glory. No. Dripping was more fitting.

“I thought you’d be happy for us,” responded Rana, plump tears unexpectedly spurting from her eyes.

“You’re crying. He’s sweating. What have you two gone and done?”

Rana wiped her cheeks. “It’s just a new transfusion they’re trying out to teach our bodies how to sweat and weep again. Why aren’t you happy for me?”

Grandmother ignored the question.

“Who’s trying out?”

Rana shrugged her shoulders. She'd never thought to ask. The Councilor had just promised her she'd feel softer. Her body would feel more regulated somehow.

Grandmother cupped the girl's face. "Your Councilor's stolen someone's water, Rana. Those depot gossips were right."

"No," Rana insisted, it wasn't like that at all. "He's a good man, you will see. He even sent men out to look for Zale well before we had even thought to raise the alarm."

Grandmother felt her heart plummet. "Promise me, you didn't tell him where?"

Rana shook her head.

"O Rana," mouthed Grandmother. "O my sweet boy." A sour ache began swelling in the woman's chest although she was unable to cry out loud. There wasn't enough water in her own well to muster any sound.

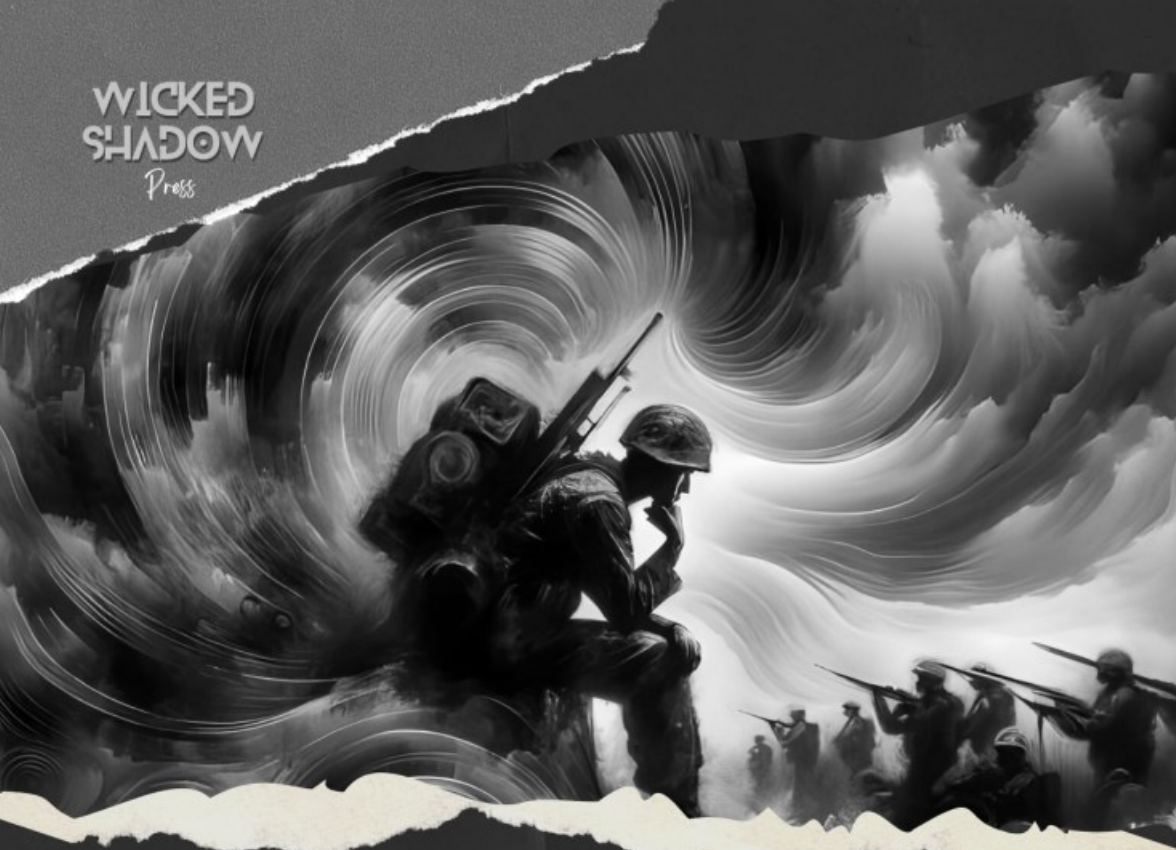
The Councilor was still speaking on the television, oozing across the screen. She cast a side-eye at him and suddenly her well began overflowing but not with sound, only rage. She grabbed her shotgun from off its hook, loading the barrel and checking the scope. "So your Councilor wants to know how it feels to sweat and weep again?"

Rana nodded, a little afraid now.

"Well, c'mon my girl. Let's show him how it really feels."



Joanna Galbraith is an Australian fiction writer and poet currently living in Tuscany, Italy. Her works have appeared in journals, podcasts and books including the highly acclaimed Clockwork Phoenix series. She is surrounded by olives and cats.



SLEEPING IN THE SHADOW OF THE WAR DRUMS

CHAD ANCTIL

Chapter 1 - The Stars that Fall

It was a cool day in that place between the hot season and the barren season, when the sky above Linae Ka was filled with

bright white stars, shooting and sparking across the red and purple dusk and passing to the east, beyond the horizon into the places beyond. Na'tu was tending the central cooking fire, preparing Tikka leaves and a boar-like Toka freshly killed by the last hunting party when the other villagers began commenting, then crying out in fear and confusion. Never before had anyone in all the tribe's memory seen such a display in the skies above Linae Ka, and most saw it as an ill omen. Of course, thought Na'tu, anything new or unusual was considered an ill omen by the tribe, though in her memory no calamity had ever befallen them. Their valley spirit, the gentle and generous Linae Ka, had always provided them with all they needed and had secluded and guarded them from the places beyond. For generations her tribe lived in peace and tranquility. Stars shooting across the sky and falling into the places beyond could not change that. Linae Ka would not let them. Fear was like the green vipers of the forest, though - always ready to strike at the least provocation.

By nightfall the whole tribe - over eighty adults strong - had gathered outside the Hia'ni, the place where the eldest and wisest of the tribe lived, sharing their wisdom and counsel with the people. The tribe waited, patiently and reverently, for the elders to come forth and hold counsel regarding the stars that fell through the sky. They waited for hours, past evensong, well into the darkness of the night, sitting quietly, torchlight flickering and illuminating worried and terrified faces, glinting off silver jewelry and feathered protection fetishes clutched by shaking hands. Finally, in the hour of the second moon, the door to the Hia'ni opened and the five elders, led by Elder Taman, emerged from within.

There was an excited murmur through the crowd as one by one the gathered people realized that each of the Elders wore their robes of high ceremony, emblazoned with the sacred red geesa feathers, vestments flowing scarlet and green and turquoise in the torchlight. The elders only dressed in these robes but once a year, for the sacred festival of the spirit of Linae Ka, the most sacred and revered of celebrations. Na'tu felt a chill of fear grip her in spite of herself, in spite of her faith in Linae Ka to protect her people and her village. She stood si-

lently and waited as the elders sat in their familiar semi-circle and began to address the people of the village.

“Children of Linae Ka.” Elder Taman said. His voice was calm and serene, but it carried throughout the village gathering place as if he stood next to each and every person gathered there, talking just to them. “The skies send us a message this day, falling stars touching the places beyond, far to the east.” He looked around, his wise gray eyes scanning all the peoples of the village. “The message the skies send us is not a message of peace, but a message of war. The drums of war, so long silenced by the great spirit of Linae Ka, will once again ring clear and loud in the ears of her children.”

At these words the gathered crowds burst into nervous whispers and wringing hands, but Elder Taman continued and the silence returned as he spoke. “The magic of great Linae Ka is strong; she has always protected her children here in her valley. We of the Hia’ni have seen the war drums sounding strong in our great valley, but like the great storms of the barren season, we have seen them pass by, their great red eyes blinded by the spirit that protects us. We must have faith, children of Linae Ka. So it is said, so it must be.”

There was no further discussion. As elder Taman had said, so it must be. The elders had wisdom far beyond their years, they had the wisdom of all the elders of the tribe, and never had they led their people astray.

Chapter 2 - The Drums of War

The village returned to an uneasy quiet after Elder Taman spoke. By the third day after the stars that fell, life had returned mostly to normal, with almost nothing being said about the stars or the ill omens they conveyed.

Na’tu had returned to her duties as muthrii – one of the village cooks and bakers. Her mother had passed on all the ceremonies and recipes of their people, meals of jorum leaves and toka meat and the various fish that swam in the clear streams of Linae Ka valley. It was

an honored place in the tribe, and she took great pride in her work and her responsibilities. Even in the leanest times, during the barren time after the hot season, or when the hunts returned time after time with no meat to smoke, Na'tu could always build a meal that was satisfying for her people and that gave them strength. She looked forward to the day her belly swelled with life and she could pass her knowledge on to her daughter, should the spirits of the green and abundant life see fit to bless her with such.

She and the other muthrii - there were four in the village, with Ha'shi's daughter also in training - worked on a special meal that night. Nothing the equal of their great celebration feasts, but more than what was normally prepared for an evening meal, with Na'tu preparing spiced Toka meat and Ha'shi mixing a salad of the ripe fruits and hyacinth flowers the valley had offered them in that morning's gathering trip. It was much work, making meals for such a large village, but it was sacred work too, and all the women enjoyed and respected it.

Evening meal was a grand and energetic celebration. The tribe knew that extra care had been taken in the preparation of the meal, even though no muthrii had said a word, and all gave thanks to the muthrii for their efforts. Even though this meal was not part of any sacred celebration, Rotha and four of his best warriors spontaneously followed the traditions of celebration ritual and carried prepared foods up to the elders table, presenting the food to them with a deep and honored bow, and all there waited until the elders had silently blessed each dish before they ate.

After the meal, several villagers brought out skins of fermented fruit nectars and shared them with all gathered there. Mortha and Durat brought out drums and played them at the fire and drove many of the villagers to dance with joy and abandon. Even Na'tu danced around in the warm orange torchlight, her heart full of joy and song, and she gave thanks to Linae Ka for all the blessings she had in her life. The dancing and music went far into the night, past the time of even-song, past the time of torchlight, until finally all were tired and headed off, alone or in pairs, to love or to sleep.

Na'tu had taken Hanro, one of Rotha's younger warriors, and

guided him to her home, neither bothering to speak, their eyes and bodies communicating all that needed to be said. They made love passionately, there in the dark, the sweat from their bodies making them slick, their breathing deep and rhythmic. Hanro brought Na'tu to her fill with his arching muscles and warrior's energy, and then she brought him to his fill, feeling his body tense under her thighs, his muscles like braided chupa vines, strong and powerful. He was silent – as was the warrior tradition – but she moaned with the pleasure of him, then kissed his firm chest and ran her fingers through his braided hair before laying beside him, listening to the sounds of the village and the spirit of Linae Ka around them.

Na'tu didn't know if she had fallen asleep, or was merely in a waking dream when she heard the drums. She thought it was her heartbeat at first, or the heartbeat of Hanro beside her, so faint and regular was the sound. But it was too slow, too deep a sound to be a heartbeat. She lay there, eyes staring into the darkness, and heard it again. A dull, deep boom that sounded as if it came from far, far away, deep in the places beyond.

She blinked her eyes several times, as if clearing the sleep and sex from them would enable her to hear more clearly. It came again. She counted her heartbeats silently, listening, and heard it again. Eleven heartbeats. She breathed in and out, willing herself to be calm and steady, and counted heartbeats again. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Boom.

She didn't know how long she lay there in silent panic, listening to the great, booming drums far off in the places beyond. They were steady, rhythmic. Almost always the same distance apart. A drum beat, a deep and terrible drum beat that chilled and terrified Na'Tu. Was she the only one who could hear it? Or were there others in the village, lying silently as she did, listening as well. Listening to the great and terrible drums.

Chapter 3 - Daybreak

Na'tu was not the only one who had heard the drums. By daybreak

the village was buzzing with excitement, fear, and confusion. Na'tu could no longer hear the drums at all with all the sounds of the village around her, but people whispered of the drums in hushed tones, as if speaking of them aloud was a bad omen in itself. All work in the village had stopped, the cookfires barely smoldered, and it seemed that people were meeting in darkened houses, talking of what they heard, what it meant, the prophecies of the elders. People were afraid, worried now, and even though they could not hear them, the dark booming of the drums of war still echoed in every part of their lives.

At midday the elders gathered and called the village to hear their counsel. All came, so that the area around the Hia'ni was full to overflowing, but there was complete silence. No person there uttered a sound as the elders sat in their semi-circle. This time it was elder Shan'ti who spoke to the gathered villagers.

"As the skies had prophesied, so have the drums of war come to Linae Ka. Even now, their sound rings through our valley, bringing with it fear and confusion." She scanned the crowd, her long gray hair woven with feathers and glittering beads. "Children of Linae Ka, we must have faith that the spirit of this valley will protect us. We must not neglect our responsibilities, for even as the drums beat far from here in the places beyond, do we not still need food, and drink? Do we not still need to hunt the great Toka and Garun? Do we not still need to gather the fruits and leaves that Linae Ka gifts to us each day?" Her voice took on a sharp, almost accusatory tone, and many of the villagers averted their eyes with the shame of neglecting their duties as they had.

"The drums of war beat far from here, but the omens and talismans say that the drums will come closer, they will beat louder still, until the very ground of Linae Ka shakes with their fury." Elder Shan'ti said, raising her wizened hands for emphasis and intimidation. "But the spirit of Linae Ka may yet grant us a boon. The spirits have demanded that in five nights time, we shall have a ceremony. It shall start as the sky is painted purple and red, the same time that the stars fell, and it will continue until we are granted a sign by Linae Ka herself. We must all prepare for this ceremony, and in five days' time, we will pray

to Linae Ka to grant us her great boon. So it is said, so it must be.”

Chapter 4 – Preparations

The village moved into high gear after the counsel of Shan'ti and the elders. Rotha and his hunters prepared for a great hunt and left the village with much fanfare, bodies painted green and yellow as was tradition, spears and blowguns hefted over their shoulders. Na'tu waved to Hanro as he walked by, strong and proud, and he smiled at her, faintly. It was not the warrior's way, showing emotion such as this before the hunt, but Hanro was young, he had only two seasons of the hunt behind him, and he and Na'tu had shared much in the past day and night. The looming fear of the drums and what was to come heightened the connection between them. Na'tu was ten seasons Hanro's elder, but he was strong and honorable, and would make a fine father for her child, should the spirits bless her in such a way.

The muthrii went into the valley and into the fruit groves and gathered fresh fruit and leaves and mushrooms until their woven kurts were full to bursting with the bounty Linae Ka granted them. They gave thanks to Linae Ka as they returned to the village to begin preparations for the festival. It was decided that two of the muthrii would prepare regular meals for the village each day with part of what they gathered, and the other muthrii – along with Ha'shi's daughter – began preparation of the festival foods that would be needed for the celebration. The elders had said that they must celebrate until they receive a sign from Linae Ka, and there was no way of knowing how long that might be, so Na'tu and the other muthrii were determined to make enough food for five festivals, so that their people would be able to keep up their strength and energy no matter how long it took for great Linae Ka to grant their boon.

By evening meal, the drums of war could be heard clearly, even over a low din of conversation. People did not speak of it openly, but there was an air of growing tension in the village, a nervous energy that made women wring their hands and men rub their hands in the dirt of Linae Ka as a ward against evil. Also adding to the tension and the

fear, the elders did not leave the Hia'ni for evening meal as they usually did, but requested that a meal of shak'ni leaves, boro mushrooms, and kota nuts be prepared and brought to them, along with two skins of fermented nectar. Once brought, they shut the door and put out all the lamps within the Hia'ni, so that no sign of them could be seen or heard.

People ate the modest evening meal that the muthrii had prepared and then those who had festival preparation work to do kept doing it, and others simply went home in silence. The village was as quiet as the barren season moon by evensong, and even Na'tu, not one for sleeping early, lay down and listened to the night, listened to the war drums beating, far off somewhere. They were different tonight - not just louder, but the cadence had changed, as if more beats were added to the rhythm. It was an unnatural sound, an unhealthy sound, like the heartbeat of a dying garun. Sleep did not come easily for Na'tu, or any of the village that night.

The louder the war drums got, the quieter the village got. Everyone went about their tasks, preparing for the ritual, gathering food, doing anything that would keep their thoughts away from the sound, from the incessant beating of those terrible drums of war. Shortly after midday, elder Taman came to the muthrii's cook fire and requested another meal of shak'ni leaves, boro mushrooms, and kota nuts be prepared for the Hia'ni dinner that night. He then told the muthrii who were preparing for the festival - this included Na'tu - that for the festival, no fire nor torch could be lit, and any cooking needed for the festival preparation must be done before midday. This was a great shock, as part of festival was always to have a great cookfire with Toka or Garun or even a hill goat roasting over the pit, but elder Taman said that his instruction was from Linae Ka herself, and could not be doubted. The muthrii bowed deeply and swore it would be done.

Evening meal was quiet, somber, the sound of the drums now unmistakable even over modest conversation, always that deep, unnatural sound, a dark sound, somehow sinister in its regularity. Everyone knew what it meant, yet none would say it aloud - they were getting closer, the drums of war. Closer to Linae Ka, closer to their village. But

what they meant, none could say. Linae Ka had always protected her children from war, hadn't she? There had not been a war in more generations than could be recalled. Elder Mal'ki had once said that her great, great grandmother had witnessed a terrible war, a war of fire, and of strange weapons, and of much death, but it was told like a fable, like one of the great stories of her people, of how great mother Ka'Na'Sie hung the moon in the sky, or how Red Doe had gained her spots. War was myth. War was legend. And as the drums droned on, Na'tu thought, war was coming.

Chapter 5 - The Fire that Burns the Sky

After evening meal, after evensong, Na'tu was grinding soka beans into meal to bake flatbreads when she heard a yell. She heard another and it almost sounded like a scream. She ran to the source of the sound, and already people were gathered, looking to the east, into the night sky. Na'tu saw it immediately, and her heart leapt with fear. Never had she seen anything like this, and she could not understand what it could mean.

The sky to the east - far, far away, past the valley, deep into the place beyond - was orange and flickering as if lit by torchlight. It was dim, but as evensong passed into night proper and the sky turned onyx black, the thin flickering ribbon was clearly visible to the naked eye. It was an unnatural thing that terrified Na'tu. For the first time, she felt a fear like she had never encountered in all her seasons. The drums were louder as well, again their cadence changed, beats added as if more drummers had joined and began playing their own terrible rhythms. The people stared at the sky, whispering to one another or else praying to Linae Ka, and began to gather outside the Hia'ni, to hear the counsel of the elders. The people waited for hours, the air filled with both the sounds of the terrible drums and frightened whispers and murmurs, but the lamps in the Hia'ni remained unlit, the elders did not present themselves. The people were afraid.

Na'tu did not sleep at all that night. The drums were loud

enough now to disturb her slumber, but even if they were not, the sight of the burning ribbon in the sky still terrified her. She prayed to Linae Ka, begged the benevolent spirit of the valley to protect her, to protect Hanro, to protect her family and her village from whatever evil was there on the horizon.

Morning brought further terror to Na'tu and the village. Far to the east, where they had seen the ribbon of fire the previous night, there were now columns of black smoke rising high into the heavens. Still far, far away from Linae Ka, the columns of smoke were mere ribbons against the pale blue sky, but there were so many. The eastern horizon was striped with them, as if whole forests were burning, being consumed by flames of war.

People wept. Some families fled, gathering a kurt full of belongings and heading west into the valley, away from the drums and the smoke, hoping for safety. Still the elders did not come out of the Hia'ni, and the people grew more and more afraid. Even the other muthrii were afraid, not daring to head deeper into the jungle to gather more mushrooms and leaves for the festival.

Na'tu found herself thinking about Hanro, and she felt fear for him. Were the hunters to the east? Were they safe? Rotha was the strongest and the bravest of all Linae Ka and his men were sharp witted and well trained, but what did they face? How could they challenge something that burned whole forests, that beat those cursed drums day and night, so loud that the ground itself must shake beneath their terrible rhythm.

At evening meal less than half the village came. The rest were either hiding in their homes or had fled deeper into the valley. Na'tu and the other muthrii served those who came, but Na'tu didn't have much of an appetite herself. To everyone's surprise, the elders all came out of the Hia'ni and sat at the elders table for evening meal. They greeted people warmly and asked how preparations for the festival were moving along, as if nothing were wrong, even though they had to raise their voices now to be heard over the constant cadence of the war drums.

People asked them for counsel, begged them for words of com-

fort, but the elders simply smiled and said that all focus must be on preparation for the festival in two days' time. That the people needed to complete their preparations, so that the spirit of Linae Ka would bless them and protect them from the drums of war. As the elders headed back into the Hia'ni, elder Taman turned and spoke to no one in particular.

“When Rotha returns tomorrow at midday, he is to knock on the Hia'ni door three times and enter. He is to speak to no man nor woman before then.” And he turned and entered the Hia'ni.

Na'tu felt excitement at the thought that Rotha – and with him Hanro – would return by next midday. She didn't even wonder how elder Taman knew; she just trusted that he was right. Even though the sound of the drums were still louder, the cadence more unnatural and terrifying than ever, and the tendrils of smoke in the east still grew thicker and – Na'tu knew – closer, she felt a renewed calm.

Na'tu actually slept that night, amidst the terrible and near thunderous din of the drums. She did not look to the eastern sky, though she knew from the talk of others that it was brighter and more pronounced, and that the yellow-orange flicker lit up the clouds and smoke over the whole of the eastern horizon like some great false dawning. Na'tu slept, and she dreamt of Hanro and his strong arms, she dreamt of their strong daughter, who she would name Na'lia, which meant flower of the sky. She did not dream of war at all. She had faith in the spirit of Linae Ka.

Chapter 6 – The Tale from the Mountain

Na'tu woke happy and content from her dreams of her daughter to be and even the din of the war drums could not drown out the joy her dreams had brought her. Dreaming of a child was said to be prophetic magic, a blessing of the spirits, and Na'tu hurried to the Hia'ni to tell the elders, as was the tradition. Elder Shinw'ai opened the door almost immediately, and smiled. Before Na'tu could speak, elder Shinw'ai calmed her with her warm blue eyes and spoke.

“When Hanro returns from the hunt, go to him, take him to your home, sit with him. Do not speak. Wash his hair and begin to braid it. He will tell you a tale. Listen, do not interrupt. At evening meal, bring him roast Toka and Linati stalks, then come to the Hia’ni and knock three times.”

“I will do as you ask elder Shinw’ai.” Na’tu replied, bowing deeply before heading to meet the other muthrii for daily duties. She trusted the elders and her heart leaped in her chest thinking of Hanro’s return, beating so hard it nearly drowned out the terrible drums of war.

Na’tu’s joy was short lived as she learned that one of the other muthrii, Gi’al, had left in the night, unable to stand the drums and the terrible fires in the sky, fleeing to the west with a group of others. So many had left now, the village seemed almost deserted. Na’tu and the remaining muthrii barely had to make any morning meal, so few were there to eat it. They served morning meal to the elders inside the Hia’ni as was custom, then went on preparing the food they had collected, still making many preparations for the festival the following night.

While preparing for the festival and for evening meal, Na’tu also made sure she had roast Toka and spiced Linati stalks prepared for Hanro, as elder Shinw’ai had instructed, keeping the meal in a woven basket near the cook fire, staying warm. She had faith, faith in the elders, and faith in the spirits. Even through the incessant drumming, that horrible thumping that never ceased, never wavered in its terrible, unnatural cadence, Na’tu had faith.

Just before midday, as predicted by the elders, Rotha and his hunters returned. Only eleven of the original twenty men were with the party however, and Na’tu had a moment of panic as she did not see Hanro. He was there, though, towards the back of the group and helping to drag the blue-feathered carcass of a huge garun on a crude litter. The villagers – those who were left, anyway – cheered the return of their heroic warriors as they came in, but those of Rotha’s men who had returned all looked haggard, weary, and frightened.

Na’tu walked up to the men as they moved into the village proper and relayed the elders’ message to Rotha, then took Hanro by the hand and led him to her home. Na’tu sat with him, saying nothing,

and pulled bits of vine and twig from his hair. She unwound his thick hair from the tuli sticks traditionally worn by the warriors, then took scented stream water and washed his hair, which was trail-dirty and starting to mat from so many days on the hunt. He smelled of dirt and sweat and fear, and Na'tu wanted to console him, to tell him of her prophetic dream, but she trusted the elders. She trusted the spirits.

The horrible drumming was their constant companion, filling the house and the world, Na'tu fought to block it out as she dried Hanro's hair and began to braid it into wide, flat braids. She had nearly finished the first when Hanro began to speak. As instructed, Na'tu did not interrupt.

"We were on the trail east, following Rotha, on the trail of a garun. Rotha was following its tracks, but it stayed ahead of us, always out of sight, out of hearing. The drums - in the deep valley the drums are worse, they echo through the trees and rocks, they make you feel sick to your stomach sometimes.

"It was the second night, still on the trail of the garun, we saw the fire in the sky. Several men fled, even though Rotha commanded them to stay. They were afraid, so afraid. I stood by Rotha, though - I did not fear. I was young then, I did not know fear yet. I did not understand.

Na'tu was confused - this had been but two days ago. How could her poor Hanro have been younger by more than a sunset? She did not interrupt, however - she just listened.

"The third day - this would have been yesterday, just after day-break - we heard the call of the garun, and it was near. We took our spears and Rotha led us forward, silent in the underbrush. The garun was there, on a small foothill before one of the valley walls. As we approached, I aimed my spear - I had a clear shot, and the beast was unaware.

"Rotha stayed my hand. He looked at me and said not a word, but then broke cover and walked towards the garun. It was huge - a head taller than even Rotha - and fat with meat. And Rotha walked towards it, spear over shoulder in a relaxed manner, not hunting it at

all. The garun cried out then and turned – not running, but walking up the path of the valley wall. Rotha followed, and some of us – myself included – followed Rotha. We didn't know what was going on, but we followed Rotha. All the while was the sound of the war drums, our constant companion, a blasphemy against Linae Ka.

“We reached an overlook – we were higher up on the valley wall than I had ever seen, than I even knew was possible. It was past mid-day, the sun hot above us, our shadows hidden by our feet. We looked out, and saw, and knew. Knew fear. Knew death. “ Hanro was shaking now, and Na'tu was embarrassed to realize he was also crying, tears stinging his face. He was terrified, quaking with fear, but he continued, though Na'tu wasn't sure she wanted to hear whatever he had seen, whatever had made him shake so.

“They were on the horizon. Monsters from the depths of shaika'na. Demons. I didn't know what to call them. I still do not have the words that describe the horrors they were. They were twice the height of the tallest makala tree, taller still than even the valley walls, fifty times the height of a man at least. It was as if they mocked the very clouds with their height. They glinted in the sun – like sun-stones after a rain. Smooth and shining, a silvery-gold color unlike any fur or feather that covers the good creatures of the valley. They walked on four legs, like a Toka, but each leg was as massive as two trees, and the body was squat and angular, like a house or tree stand.

“The heads moved side to side as if they were sniffing for something, though no mouth or nose or ear was evident, so smooth and angular they were. The closest to us – still many days away by trail – had what looked like a single huge red eye, the size of a massive boulder, glowing like the morning sun burning before a storm.

“The demons breathed out shafts of light, pure white and a sickly green color, and left fire and smoke in their wake. Whole regions of the places beyond were left destroyed and barren as they passed through, the lands left burning and dead, nothing but ash remained.” Hanro was shaking now, quaking with fear in Na'tu's arms as he recounted the tale. He breathed deeply and seemed to calm his nerves before he continued.

“At the sight of those blasphemous... things... Kataru leapt from the height of the mountain onto the rocks below. Others ran screaming into the forest, driven mad by the evil of the things. I was terrified beyond understanding, beyond movement, and I am glad for it, or else I may have joined them had I been able.” He turned to look at Na’tu, looking deeply into her eyes. She looked back at him, touching his shoulder, adding her strength to his own. He averted his gaze and continued again, his voice gaining strength.

“Finally, Rotha turned to us with an... understanding in his eyes. Not fear, not the terror I felt corrupting my very soul, but a warrior's understanding. He had a look that said ‘we cannot defeat this enemy, we dare not try.’ He looked to those of us who remained and, in a voice as strong and clear as befits our warrior-chieftain, said simply ‘our place is with our tribe, there is where we must return.’ and he headed back down the mountain. We followed him, still in a daze, still in the grip of terrors that...

“And then, when we were at our darkest, the spirit Linae Ka provided us a gift, a token to show she is still with us. As we reached the bottom of the path, the great garun lay there, dead. No hand nor spear had struck it, but it lay there for us just the same. Rotha told us to build a litter to carry the beast back, that we would offer up Linae Ka’s bounty for the good of the tribe. He didn’t say the words, but we all felt that it was a funerary feast we were carrying between us as we trekked back to the village.”

He was quiet for a time and Na’tu finished braiding his hair into tight black cords, tying the braids off with twined varu root. She kissed his muscled back and listened to him breathe, then a question occurred to her, something she didn’t yet understand.

“And the war drums?” she asked. She couldn’t help herself, she was shaking and terrified from the description of the great beasts that even now lumbered toward Linae Ka. Hanro turned his head, his eyes meeting hers again, red and wet with tears, filled with shame for his terror.

“There are no drums, Na’tu.” He said in barely a whisper. “It is the sound of their feet against the earth. That cursed drumming we

have been hearing is nothing less than the sound of their footfalls as they walk across the world. The drums of war are their blasphemy against Linae Ka and the places beyond.”

Na’tu could not speak. Her mind, as learned as she was in the ways of the valley, of her people, simply could not accept what she had been told. The drumming sound, that horrible unnatural cadence, was the footfalls of some demonic titans? It was madness, it was blasphemy, but somehow Na’tu knew it was the truth, and it shook her faith. More than anything Hanro had told her, the truth of those terrible drums had shaken her faith to its very core, for how could the great spirit of Linae Ka, their great protector, stand up to such a thing? How could any of them survive?

Na’tu breathed deeply and closed her eyes, willing the tears away, and said nothing. She thought of her dream, of her child prophesied, and held onto that one thing, that one golden sliver of hope, of faith.

As she was told by the elders, she gave Hanro a meal of roast Toka and her spiced Linati stalks, then left him at her home and walked to the Hia’ni. She knocked three times, and was allowed entrance into the Hia’ni. The door closed behind her.

Chapter 7 – From Dawning until Dreaming

The interior of the Hia’ni was hot with incense and spices, with the sweat of the elders. The air was charged with energy as Na’tu entered. Elder Taman bade her sit on a prayer mat and offered her kota nuts and fresh water. They let her sit and eat and drink before they spoke, and once she was prepared, they simply asked her to tell them the tale that Hanro had told her. She repeated the tale as best she could, though she was careful not to discuss Hanro’s fearful reaction to the demons when she recounted the details of the hunting expedition. Once she had recounted the tale, the elders thanked her and she left the Hia’ni, breathing deeply, the cool outside air clearing her head and her senses after the humid and heady atmosphere of the elder’s rooms, after the terrifying tale of the drums that were not drums.

The day had slipped away from Na'tu and the other muthrii were already serving evening meal to the few people who would still leave their homes under the now thunderous pounding of the drums of war, the hideous footfalls of the approaching monsters. She returned to her home to find Hanro sleeping soundly in her bed, so she left him some roasted flatbread and leaves for when he woke, then returned to the meeting area to help the other muthrii.

They had decided - or been told by the elders - to roast the garun overnight, that it would be the centerpiece of the great festival the following evensong. The drums continued their blasphemous cadence as the women worked deep into the night, past torchlight, through the depths. The sky burned, Na'tu could see the smoke and the orange glow filling the wide skies overhead, smell the burning fields and trees. The air was thick with ash; it was close now. It was so near that the ground shook as the women worked, as they stoked the ovens. None slept - Na'tu didn't even feel tired as she kneaded dough and chopped stalks and prepared leaves and mushrooms. As the dawn came and the great sun burned through the false-dawn of the war fires, the muthrii began laying the great feast bowls and plates on the great celebration tables while the heat and smells of the great ovens and cook-fires began to rouse the rest of the remaining villagers out of their terrified slumber.

At midday all the fires and ovens were quenched, as was decreed by the elders, and the villagers who remained - Na'tu felt they were less than thirty adults strong now - sat in prayer and ate a modest meal of nuts and leaves and water from the spring. Hanro had wakened refreshed and resigned to whatever fate the spirits had chosen for him, and was helping Na'tu and the other muthrii finish the preparations for the great ceremony, until finally all was in readiness. They all sat and listened to the thundering drums as they drew nearer and nearer, the scent of great fires and ash and smoke filling the air around them. Hanro held Na'tu in his strong arms as they sat and waited. Some of the villagers prayed. Some wept. All eyes were on the door of the Hia'ni, waiting for the arrival of the elders, the beginning of the ceremony.

Finally, as the sky turned to purple and red and orange and the sound of the drums, of those hideous footfalls, were so loud they drowned out all but shouted conversation, the door of the Hia'ni opened and the elders filed out in their finest ceremonial robes. Elder Taman wore deep reds and greens and carried a staff of carved makala wood and blue and white gurun feathers. Elder Shan'ti wore deep blue and purple, a robe made of feathers and tanned hides, and a headdress of the rarest of gems and feathers. The other elders were similarly dressed in their finest ceremonial robes, and their procession wound through the assembled villagers slowly and reverently. They made three circuits around the ceremonial area, then sat in a semi-circle and closed their eyes. They sat in silence, the pounding of the drums ringing through the air, and the elders said nothing. Did nothing. They sat, and they waited. Waiting for the spirits to answer their prayers, or waiting to die, Na'tu had no idea. She held onto Hanro and closed her eyes and, with thoughts of her daughter and faith in her heart, faith in the spirit of Linae Ka, she waited as well.

Na'tu had no idea how long they sat there. She knew she had been awake for more than a night and a day, yet she wasn't tired. There was an energy in the air, an energy of terror from the hideous drumming, from the monstrous things that bore down on them. But, from the elders, still sitting in a semi-circle, eyes closed in reverent prayer, there was another kind of energy. An energy that held them all there, together. Could it have been.... hope? Hope that maybe, impossibly, they might survive this night? Or at the very least, they would all perish together and walk hand in hand into the sunderlands, into the gray mists of forever...

Na'tu wasn't sure when or how things changed, she just realized that the elders were on their feet, and then the rest of them followed, getting to their feet and then, as one, looked to the North. They saw it then - the demon, glinting in the firelight, its massive legs pistoning up and down, each footfall a deep thrum that shot through the earth itself and made Na'tu's chest ache. It moved slowly, ponderously, this impossibly huge thing, this monster of monsters. Then there was another, to the south, so impossibly huge, a monstrous nightmare come to

life. Na'tu heard cries, screams, fear and terror like she had never encountered in all her thirty seasons. There was no escape, there was no hope, there was only death. Nothing else existed in the world but the noise, and the flames, the fear, the screaming.

Through all the madness and terror, without thinking, Na'tu took Hanro's hand and held it. She felt his strength, felt his energy, his power. And then she reached to her other side and took someone else's hand - she wasn't sure whose, it was slick with fear-sweat, but it was warm, and the grasp was firm. Then she saw that Hanro was holding someone else's hand as well, and one by one, in the shadow of death, under the deafening sound of the cursed war drums, her tribe held each other's hands, connected there, from cleaner to hunter to mutrii to elder, all of her tribe, all of the children of the spirit of Linae Ka, were joined as one. There was a renewed energy that filled the space as they looked at one another, and then back to the nightmares that bore down on them.

The demon's eye looked at them, massive and burning with a sickly red glow, like the dying embers of a weak fire. It scanned across the village, looking straight at them as it lumbered impossibly huge, its glinting silver-gold body filling the sky. The villagers, led by the elders, began singing the Cho'ni'Ka, a prayer of thanks to the spirit of Linae Ka, and Ta'nu waited for tongues of demon flame to shoot out of the thing and burn them all to a cinder. She gripped Hanro's hand tightly and closed her eyes, still singing into the night, her voice hoarse from the smoke and the crying, but never wavering. Her faith never wavering.

There was no flame. No tongues of death. The creatures never stopped, never slowed, and as they passed through Linae Ka valley, their war-fires went unlit. The war drums thundered, the ground shook, several of the smaller houses were damaged or partially destroyed by the violence of the things' passing, but the things, the demons, passed through the night and by dawn had moved beyond Linae Ka valley, to the west, into the barren lands where no man dare walk. Finally, as the dawn sun began to brighten the sky, elder Taman held his arms out for silence, and he spoke.

Chapter 8 - The Blessings of Linae Ka

“Children of Linae Ka” elder Taman spoke. The sound of the drums was still loud enough that he had to shout, but his voice was loud and confident. “Blessings be upon you all. Blessings from the sacred spirit of Linae Ka. She is pleased with her children. The demons will trouble us no more. So it is said, and so it must be.” And with that simple address, the village erupted into cheers and celebration, tears of relief and joy.

The children of Linae Ka feasted for five days, until the sounds of the war drums finally faded into nothingness and the fires on the horizon burned out. Some of those who had run to hide in fear returned to the village and were welcomed back by all. The elders did not set foot back into the Hia’ni until evensong of the fifth day, and the people cheered and honored them as they took their leave. Na’tu took Hanro by the hand and led him again to her hut, where they loved one another until the stars themselves left the sky in preparation for the sun’s return.

For many years the villagers told the stories of the drums of war and of the blessings of Linae Ka, their protector spirit. There were scars, reminders of those times, of the war drums and the monsters that stood as tall as the sky and burned all they touched. Though their fires could not scorch sacred Linae Ka, they left behind them mighty prints where their monstrous feet fell. One of these is now a fresh spring used by the village, named for elder Taman, who passed away two seasons after that night, after the monsters, the demons.

In the season following the time of the drums of war, as it had come to be called, Na’tu’s belly swelled with life as she had always hoped, and she was blessed with a daughter, who she named Na’lia. Na’lia was followed a season later by a boy child, who Hanro named Daris, which means spear of makala, both powerful and sacred. They were strong and fine children, and they made their parents, and the village, very proud.

When they were of age, as was the tradition, Na’Lia and Daris

would sit by the fire and listen to the elders tell of the time of the drums of war, and of the monsters, and of the great guardian spirit of Linae Ka. After a time, the children began to think it was a fable, a great story of the people, like the tales of how great father Ka'Na'Sie hung the moon in the sky, or how Red Doe had gained her spots. Na'tu said a silent prayer to the great spirit of Linae Ka, praying that her children would never know just how real that time was. That the great demons and the time of the drums of war would always remain just that - a story to tell over the fire.

Chad Ancil grew up in the fascinating little state of Rhode Island, birthplace of H.P. Lovecraft and his peculiar branch of fiction, where he found his love for reading and horror at a young age - probably too young, but that's just how Generation X did it. He has always been creative, taking up both writing and DJing in his teenage years before joining the Navy as an electronics engineer on fast attack submarines through the 90s.



Moving from New England to various parts of California, Hawaii, and beyond gave Chad a view into strange underworlds of art and dance and literature, from technicolor electronic dance parties in abandoned warehouses to vampire poetry performance art held in graveyards, to crazed robot combat held in secret, under dark highway overpasses. Throughout these experiences he often imagined there were secret inhuman forces at play, and created detailed landscapes where the dark world of the supernatural brushed up against his own mundane world, driving his creativity and his writing.



PRETENDING TO LIVE

RUSSELL ADAMS

We are already into the third day of the Wind Darkness. In the middle of a still, searing afternoon, winds came blasting unannounced out of the mountain passes. The ever-present ash dunes took life and ascended to darken the sky until there was no more sun and we were left under a heavy, leaden twilight which will remain for many days to come. In the open, breath is

impossible--the fine, deadly powder penetrates any mask of cloth or hand held over the nose and mouth.

Where did all this ash come from? No one remembers though some claim to know. Perhaps it has always been here.

Travelers near shelters strong enough to break the crushing wind take hurried refuge in thick tents and don't emerge, no matter how intense their hunger or thirst, until the winds have died away leaving days calm again.

Those caught in the open or finding no better than inadequate shelter can only watch as tents and lives blow away, leaving them to choke on ash, be buried by it, and forever cease their desperate wanderings.

This cursed land is our home, a place of shifting, insubstantial hills where water is scarce and fought over more bitterly than any wealth of mere gems or metal, a land where heat and sun turn even young children strange long before they have a chance to learn what normal can be.

Only night breaks the heat and, in its place, comes a cold so savage that darkness is no less dreaded than daytime. This world knows only extremes where nothing is permanent except the eternal cycle of heat and cold, the times of Wind Darkness, and the generations of broken, crazed, soulless things that call this world their own.

So we have lived for all time, all we countless cursed tribes. We tell our children lies about a lost time of greenness when there was so much water our ancestors had to cross it in floating baskets. The children don't believe. They can't imagine such profligate lushness. They aren't fools the way their parents are. They see their world for what it is and they have become hard enough to accept it.

Oh, yes, what few children there are, are very hard indeed. They are terrifying little beasts that run in packs and have not the slightest inkling of compassion or mercy. They understand the cheapness of life and are quick to squander its small coin.

But the truth is, it doesn't matter whether they believe or not. We tell our lies to bring this tiniest bit of solace to despairing adults

who still have need of living with a tolerable fantasy when the reality of our existence becomes too unbearable. We hold tightly to a fantasy of some saner, gentler life lest the instinct to keep taking yet one more breath fails, and we all abandon our tents and walk forth into the next Wind Darkness inhaling as deeply as we can.

We are now into the third day of the Darkness when nights don't get as cold as normally, so we save rest for the unbearable day. Alna--my wife, my sister, my everything--is preparing for sleep. This time we were lucky for when the winds came up violently out of season, we were in a narrow valley that sheltered our tent from the worst of their assault.

But nothing keeps out the ash that gets into everything. Alna is standing near the lamp, loosening her long, dark hair when the wracking coughing hits. In time, we know, it will turn into the blood cough, but this is something of which we never speak. When the violent spasms end, she turns to me, exhausted. Her expression makes me want to howl my despair in a voice drowning out the wind itself.

"We are the dead who have been damned," she says flatly. "This is not a place of life. Only death thrives in this fierce land now forsaken by all gods, merciful as well as cruel." With that she drops her light undergarment and stands glowingly naked in the light of the single oil lamp. "Do you want to pretend once more that we are still alive?"

Instead of answering, I am again lost in looking at her. Her skin is that luminous, golden brown so much admired by our people. "Do the dead have need of breasts?" I challenge her. "Do the damned have any need to pretend?"

She inspects her left breast intently as if seeing whether my question might be answered there. This takes longer than I expect. When she's done, she repeats the inspection on the other side. Her expression reveals nothing of what she has concluded.

"I think," she says, "that the damned have breasts because it is part of our punishment. We must continue to carry these useless things of life so that we are reminded constantly of what we have irretrievably

lost. And yes, we damned have a most terribly urgent need to pretend, for without hope, pretense is all that's left us."

I don't want to believe this, but neither do I wish to disagree with her.

Although I have not yet answered her question, I too am naked. Were I a traditional husband, male, her answer would be obvious, but my expression is enough. Alma lies back on the sleeping mat, leaving her legs open while pressing a cloth tightly over her mouth. It helps little, and her breathing remains rough and difficult.

For a moment longer, I take in the her color. I am darker. No sun-glow has ever been upon my skin. I am the dreaded, native brown of excrement before ash turns it grey. The light of the lamp never glows on my skin. My skin kills any light unfortunate enough to fall upon it.

In our tent, surrounded by screaming winds and pummeling ash, I take my place, and we make our pretense as real as we can. This time it is a quiet act with no intensity, a tired thing that grinds on for a long time until we finally both reach a moment that rises almost to lifelike. Afterward we sleep, exhausted by our own pretense. Sleep, one of our few respites from life.

Once we had dreams, she and I. When our lonely separate lives became one, so too did our separate dreams. Hers and mine, told over and over until they blended, became the only child either would let ourselves conceive in this wretched existence.

Our dream--our child, our joy and tears. What life might still have been had not the ash destroyed it all, the ash that rose from the horizon one day to meet the setting sun and never ceased coming until it had suffocated the sky, until it had piled up higher than anyone could imagine possible. Or so some tell as if they really know.

This is our dream, this bright child whose parents are Alna and Teroni...

Under a midday sun, broad bands of green extend back from a wide ribbon of flowing water. These channels our people have built to irri-

gate the orchards and fields where fruit and vegetables are to be had by any freely for the picking.

The thick surrounding trees throw deep shadows over my path. Though the sun is at its height, coolness is everywhere, and the ground beneath my feet is moist. The daily rain is over. Here the rains are gentle and warm and depart not long after they begin. Old legends tell of times when angry gods sent deluges pounding down to crush everything it fell upon, but those times are long past. Today's gods are generous and smile wherever they look.

My hair is now worn braided at the temples, no longer loose like a girl's, not yet wound high like a matron's. As I leave the shadows to enter the meadow, I come upon Mirisant Talisha, the daughter of my father's patron, kneeling amidst wildflowers. The glow of the sun is on her skin, and, as always when I see her, I can imagine nothing more beautiful.

We have spoken briefly before at public gatherings, but this is our first time alone. She chooses this moment to reach into her basket of flowers to select a deep red *murtha* bloom for her hair which she fastens in place with an artless movement of great loveliness.

When she looks up, our eyes meet. At the intensity in my own eyes, her gaze drops quickly in token modesty to her lap but lifts again almost at once.

"That is your flower," I say, looking at the one she is wearing, and realize I have no idea what I had meant to say. Perhaps only that this flower tucked into her thick, flowing hair is its perfect complement. No other should ever take its place.

Her gaze holds mine boldly now—oh, such an improper, charming boldness. As if she can read my thoughts as I look at her. Before marriage, girls our age are normally allowed much freedom, but Mirisant Talisha is so much above me, that I should leave her to gather wildflowers. But I cannot, especially when after a moment she offers me one of her full, warming smiles.

I know that though the words make no sense, I want her to say of the flower she is wearing, *It is yours, as well, if you wish* but she re-

mains silent, perhaps waiting for me to say something she can actually respond to.

There is a tiny, deep-purple flower by my foot that I suddenly notice and kneel to pick for her. Without hesitation she accepts it from me, and for a moment our fingers touch.

"This is one I needed for my bouquet but couldn't find," she tells me. "I sought all morning, but until you came, it was nowhere. Let me give you another in its place."

She takes from her basket that little yellow flower called *norue* whose stems are often entwined into the loose weave of fabrics worn by men and women on joyful, ceremonial occasions. When our fingers touch this time, they do not hasten to separate. Indeed, with our hands next to each other, there seems to be, impossibly enough, a touch of sunglow on my own brownness as well. But instead of releasing the *norue* flower, she winds the sinuous stem into my garment's weave over my left breast.

When she takes her hand away at last, recklessly, I breach the etiquette of our people in a way that could humiliate me personally but would still leave my family almost untouched were my breach revealed.

"Mirisant Talisha," I say softly, using her public sun name, "would you share with me your water name." *Water name*, from the water store each family maintains in cisterns and pools, used freely by all within the family and by friends and guests. Properly, it is for her father to make this name known to favored visitors or to withhold if they have not yet entered far enough into the family's private circle. I am presuming much in asking for such an undeserved gift.

Politeness and meaning require me to trill the *r* of *iru*, you, and again in *irus*, your, but my tongue has turned leaden, and I realize with horror that I have inadvertently lapsed into the intimate-familiar form of address that transforms my too-forward request into another so personal it is almost indecent. I have just directly asked Mirisant to reveal to me her moon name, her most personal possession that only

a new husband might properly learn. Shame at once leaps to my cheeks.

But none of this matters to the bold Mirisant Talisha who seems to have been born without maidenly shame.

"I am Alna," she says without hesitation, without apparent embarrassment. "My moon name is Alna."

Alna, I whisper to myself, treasuring the precious gift she has given me, this intimacy to which I have no right. For the moment, I am only relishing its sweet sound. I have given no thought yet to its ancient meaning.

"I was given *She Who Punishes* for my most personal name instead of being allowed to choose one for myself," she continues, "because when my father urgently needed a strong son, he received only another daughter born without favor of the gods, except for a fine skin which matters little enough.

"Such an unlucky name cannot remain secret. I am proven to bring misfortune to anyone who knows me. Your father must have learned personally how far my family's fortunes have dwindled since I was born. Undoubtedly, that is why no one has yet approached wanting to marry me.

"Any suitor so foolish would be risking unknowable but certain grief. Loving Alna is the surest way to bring utter ruin upon us both."

In the dim light of the single oil lamp of our tent, the ever-present ash makes Alna cough so violently she suddenly begins choking. I offer the comfort of my hand upon the gritty sweat of her shoulder. The spasms go on for a frighteningly long time without letup.

We are no more unfortunate than any of our people. I don't believe the old stories that tell of a time of cursing. If even the smallest part of these stories we tell our children were true, then whatever god or goddess destroyed that gentle world and left us this one in its place would have to be such a monster that we might as well rush out into the thick ash-filled air and breathe in as deeply as we can to take ourselves forever beyond their reach.

Surely our dream can be only a confection of remembered childhood stories. A story we continue to tell each other because the truth--that we are the dead who have not yet found rest--is too terrible for any to live with. Surely, this world must always have been the way it is. And just as surely it must forever remain this way.

In the dim light of our tent, outside of which the wind screams and howls, Alna finally lies quietly. Any dark, tiny specks on the back of her hand go pointedly unnoticed. Without a word--eyes fierce as hawks'--we grab for each other at the same moment, blindly, savagely crushing each other's flesh and clawing each other's skin until bright blood flows, and the pain of our coupling becomes so intense that we can forget for precious moments that we are two dead things pretending yet one more desperate time that we are truly, ragingly alive.

Russell Adams has been writing all his life in various forms, mainly short stories and novels, but there are a few plays and some poetry as well. The impulse to create stories originated at twelve when, at his grandmother's funeral, he encountered his first SF magazine. It was love at first sight.

WICKED
SHADOW
Press



HOLOGRAM WRITERS

TOM BALL

I, Ray, say to you, Anne, that your hologram Dreamworld is amazing. I like the musicians in particular who have clever animal men singing in a choir. It is the most harmonious music I have ever heard. And I like your virtual look in this World, you look amazingly beautiful, better than your real-World persona. And I like your poets, like hologram AY-554, who wrote:

You flew into the sun

Just to have fun
 And win the praise of everyone
 And the hologram poet, DT-776, who wrote:
 Lonely Moon
 Will be inhabited soon
 And one day
 Like the others will end in ruin

You say, you have thousands of hologram poets in your World, many of whom are copies of real poets or clones of dead ones...

And I say I like your hologram writers, in particular BZ-333 who wrote the screenplay for, "Judas' Lot," which was about a human spy who told hologram rebels that the spies were after them and so they escaped to hide in others' Worlds. Of course, the spy was put to death in the film, but it was food for thought.

And I liked hologram writer, CL-988., who wrote about a far future in which only holograms existed. It was a haunting, chilling account of the last days of human beings who were at each others' throats and killed each other off, even in deep Space. The film was called, "The Last Humans," of course.

And I liked holowriter, XDA-144, who wrote, "Loving Holograms," about how some holos were designed for love and love only. Of course their love was cerebral, all-encompassing love, but many humans loved them more than they loved other humans. I figured it was a realistic World that could easily become true.

Also there was the holofilm, by hologram TR-898, called "Ratcheting Up the Gamble," about a holoman who bet on the success of his own film and the film was about holograms gambling on what type of potential lovers one would love successfully from a random list of pictures. There would be 10 contestants and they would bet like poker always raising the stakes. Typically, they bet on the same best looking holowoman, and who she would choose. The list was typically 100 holowomen, but sometimes, it was the opposite, 100 male holos and 10 female holo contestants or a gay game. Everyone seemed to want to play. And the truth was most people who played

were overly confident and imagined they were one of the most attractive, physically and in terms of intellect and personality. Of course, everyone had had plastic surgery and genetic therapy to improve their looks, but some had a cleverer or more sexy profile. And if a holo could love 90 or more, out of the 100, it was called a “grand slam,” and one earned quadruple credits. In time the perpetual losers, lost their shirt and could gamble no more and fell into the love slave category in which successful gamblers could have them for free. And do anything they wanted to them.

And this love game rapidly became a hit amongst humans and androids and even Superbeings. Love was just a game to most modern people. And some pundits said the game cheapened the human love experience.

Another hologram writer, MJ-076 wrote “Hologram experiments,” which was a documentary about studies like monogamy amongst holos. And also making holos crazy, how some holos were completely mad and crazy for good human love and would do anything to get it. And another about holograms who wanted to change into humans and the mixed results that came of that. Many holos idealized humans as their creators and considered them to be Gods.

And another trial run described by MJ-076 was with holograms who were greedy for money to have material things like a beautiful palace, and a space car... Still another study was about how holograms who could be born to be writers, musicians, businessman and scientists of all kinds. And another study was about how holos could live without humans and just have their own little Worlds. And then there was the famous study about how holos were ideal for teleporting long distances. To be in the vanguard of human settlement. And there were many other experiments with holos.

And another hologram film, this one by RT-093, was, “Precarious Days,” about how holograms could survive a nuclear war almost unscathed. And such wars were bound to come and so holos would inherit the Earth and Space.

Also, there was holo TX-099, who wrote the screenplay for

“Holograms Loving Androids,” a documentary about how holograms changed into androids and vice versa. Many androids and holograms were excited to change into humans as well. And many humans wanted to change into androids and holograms, too.

And another hologram film, by XZ-014, was about some holos were lonely and miserable and had been sent to make new colonies for human settlement (not teleporting there however, just went alone in air cars). The point of the film was that holograms had feelings, just like humans and should be treated with respect and honor and were gregarious and needed a social life. But most humans figured 3-D Online friendship and love were good enough for holograms.

And another hologram writer, DC-066, wrote about a future in which holograms had been teleported to millions of Star Systems in the near future and built Worlds for holograms only.

Then there was hologram writer, AS-002, who made the film, “Horror on Trash Street,” it was about how holograms became obsolete, and were put out to pasture where they would have no job or were even destroyed in many colonies in Space. The holo writer of this movie said it was a crime against all humanity, and the film influenced a lot of peoples’ views.

Another hologram writer, AMN-009 wrote, “A.D. 2700” in which holograms had come to rule all Earth and Space and everyone had transformed into a hologram. And these inheritors were non-materialistic and didn’t need houses or air cars or drugs. And the holograms roamed freely, and got together in like-minded groups. And lived life to the full with plenty of cerebral sex and good friendships. They figured science had gone far enough and lived just for pleasure.

Then there was the holowriter, CD-801, who wrote, “Heaven is for Holograms,” stating that only spirits could go to Heaven, and such spirits were all holograms. And Heaven was full of nice holos. Those who were not so nice, went to Hell. And the future Earth would be one giant Heaven with billions and billions of holos.

And another holowriter, was SR-444, who wrote “Questionable Holograms,” which was about strange holograms, who seemed mostly

to have no use to humans, and didn't like humans. But in the movie, these holograms claimed that humans were no big deal and they refused to worship humans or love humans, as many holograms did.

Another holowriter was YA-543, she wrote "Holo nightmare," which was about how future humans had gotten rid of holograms altogether. Of course, nearly all holos believed they had use and would be still alive in the far future. But this film disturbed many holos. And many of them thought more about the future as a result and many demanded the vote. But the humans of the day weren't going to allow that. The pro-human movement was gaining strength. And no one seemed to know what would happen.

And there were many other scriptwriters who were androids. And the most famous among them were known to almost all humans, though a small minority refused to watch any hologram film. This minority though was very vocal and extremely anti-hologram and anti-android.



Tom Ball has published novels, novellas, short stories, poetry and flash in 42 publications. Visit <https://tomballbooks.com> Online Journal Website (he is senior editor/co-founder): <https://fleasonthedog.com>



THE FINAL TWO MINUTES

STEPHEN A. RODDEWIG

Combat Commander Lou Dowds sat at his station, leafing through the pages of a worn paperback of *On the Road*. His love for Kerouac's subversiveness had always drawn suspicious gazes from his superiors in the strait-laced and stiff-backed United States Military.

Probably the reason I ended up in this dead-end assignment, he thought, staring at the white walls broken up only by mainframes and data servers. No windows in sight.

The irony that the Air Force had decided to assign someone they feared might be a subversive to command one of the most secret and heavily guarded facilities in the Continental U.S. was not lost on him.

Though, I suppose, there are plenty of fail safes built into this operation to prevent any of us from going rogue.

To the right of the Main Launch Console with its buttons and indicators, the radio speaker crackled to life. Several urgent beeps followed, jarring both Dowds and Deputy Combat Commander Nelson Jarret out of their respective dazes.

Dowds couldn't help but notice Jarret's snort as they each reached for their notebooks. The feeling was mutual: command had really been loving their drills recently.

Pencil in hand, each Air Force officer waited for the metallic voice that followed.

"Georgia, Delta, 1, 4, Hotel, Victor."

At the sixth word, the room seemed to darken.

No Zulu. The test authentication always ends in Zulu.

At the Alternate Launch Console, Jarret had also picked up on the discrepancy as he slowly spun in his desk chair, holding up the copied message in his hand for Dowds to read. Standard operating procedure was for them to exchange notebooks, but neither felt like correcting the other as Dowds held up his own writing.

Each looked at the other's handwriting for a moment that seemed to span lifetimes. Neither shook his head or gave any other indication they disagreed with their copying of the broadcast.

Valid message.

The first fail safe cleared.

Then, running on thousands of hours of drills, Dowds rose from his chair and walked with stiff legs to the Authenticator Safe. He started to spin the padlock combination to his memorized code, only then noticing Jarret hadn't joined him to undo the second lock.

Instead, the Deputy Combat Commander had remained at the Alternate Launch Console, staring at the six words written in graphite.

Feeling Dowds' eyes on him, he finally stood and made his own stiff walk to the safe.

In admirable time, Jarret had his padlock removed, almost beating Dowds despite the Combat Commander's head start.

Commander and deputy commander combinations entered.

The second fail safe cleared.

The safe door swung open, and Dowds removed the authenticator cards, flipping through them as he returned to the Main Launch Console. Jarret watched with glassy eyes as Dowds located the envelope with "GD" in block letters.

Georgia, Delta.

The third fail safe cleared.

Dowds reflected that you never could know how someone would stand up under the strain of the "big one," the time when you no longer had the comforting veil of training to hide behind. Jarret appeared to be on the verge of cracking. Had this all been a drill, Dowds would have recommended the man be relieved of his post.

The gray envelope contained a single red square of paper. On that paper was printed the required sequence: G, D, 1, 4, H, V.

The final fail safe cleared. This was real.

After a second to exhale, Dowds turned to Jarret's desperate eyes beneath a forehead beaded with sweat. Dowds nodded once.

Jarret's eyes fell. Dowds could imagine what must be going through his subordinate's mind. Jarret had two sons and a daughter, with his first grandchild on the way.

Still, the man had not forgotten his duty. He removed the key from the special lining sewn to the inside of his uniform shirt.

Dowds removed his own key. The cold metal in his fingers and all it represented ate at the corners of his consciousness, but instinct had already guided it into the slot in the Main Launch Console. Dowds met Jarret's now listless stare, finding himself at a loss for words when the time came for the final command. Instead, he held up three fingers.

Two fingers.

One finger.

Closed fist.

Each turned their key, holding it in place for the required five seconds. Dowds heart seemed to slow, slamming against his chest wall as each moment ticked by.

Then a green indicator lit up on the console: **LAUNCH ENABLE**

A heartbeat later: **BATTERIES ACTIVATED**

Within seconds, the batteries had charged, and the system switched to internal power: **APS POWER**

The bell rang above their heads, signaling the bay door had finished its long slide backward. Eyes drawn from the console, Dowds found Jarret had not collapsed into his desk chair as he had halfway expected.

Instead, the man stood at full attention, eyes trained on a horizon neither man could see.

Dowds turned back to the console. They had now reached the final series of events.

GUIDANCE GO

MAIN ENGINE START

FIRE IN ENGINE

The launch room quivered beneath their feet despite the reinforcement. Looking up toward where the missile would be rising from the sands of the Arizonan desert at that moment, Dowds turned his eyes back to the now inert Main Launch Console, forever frozen in its final stage.

LIFT OFF

Neck buzzing, he turned his head to find Jarret looking at him once more. The thousand-yard stare had retreated, replaced by a face that seemed equal parts terrified and ashamed.

Guilt, Dowds realized.

As the tremors subsided, Dowds watched a single tear trace down Jarret's cheekbone.

No longer able to look his subordinate in the eye, Dowds sunk to his chair and retrieved his Kerouac in fingers that were now trembling. The entire operation had taken two minutes, slightly slower than the prescribed time, but that didn't seem important anymore.

Words blurred in Dowds' vision. No matter. He knew them all by heart. With eyes moister than before, he looked up to find Jarret hadn't moved.

The man seemed to be waiting. Waiting for Dowds to speak, to wave the flag and state that they had done their duty, that they had defended their country.

Waiting for his commander to absolve them of the horror they had just unleashed.

In response, Dowds only shook his head and turned back to *On the Road*, ignoring the couple of water spots that had now appeared in one corner.

The end of the world had started in the silence between these two men.

So why speak now?

Stephen A. Roddewig is an award-winning storyteller and playwright from Virginia (USA). He won second place in the 2023 Vocal Painted Prose challenge, and his stories are featured in *Abyss & Apex*, *Diet Milk Magazine*, *Struggle Magazine*, and *Wintermute Lit*. When not writing, he enjoys collecting records and running races.



FROM BELOW

WARREN BENEDETTO

“Will we be safe there?” the boy asks.

The roar of the powerful outboard motor echoes through the flood-ravaged streets of Old Manhattan as I pilot the boat down the center of what used to be 5th Avenue. Water laps at the facades of the submerged structures, spraying a fine mist into the cold night air.

I glance down at the child. He’s young, no older than ten, with straight black hair and dark brown skin. The way his bangs flop over his forehead reminds me of myself as a child.

“Of course,” I lie. “You’ll love it.”

The boy’s mother shoots me a nervous glance, then puts her arm around her son and whispers into his ear in a foreign tongue. The boy nods. He rests his head on her shoulder. She hugs him tighter and kisses the top of his salt-crusted hair.

A gust of freezing wind whips between the buildings. All around, the remains of skyscrapers jut from the water like ancient monoliths—hollow paeans to long-dead gods—their once-towering heights clipped short by the rising tides. An empty flagpole protrudes from one of them, a spear in the heart of a dying giant. Smears of rust cascade down the stone from the corroded metal base like bloodstains from a mortal wound.

I look up at our destination, a black glass facade looming in the distance. It’s dark except for a ring of light spilling from the top-floor windows.

The penthouse.

Floor-to-ceiling shades in every window prevent people outside from seeing in and people inside from having to see out. Behind the shades, a pair of silhouettes move fluidly past the glass: separating, spinning, then coming back together again, arms intertwining, bodies swaying, dual shadows merging into a single multi-limbed form.

Christ, I think. Are they dancing?

I can’t remember the last time I saw anyone dancing. It seems almost sacrilegious after all that has happened. The floods. The droughts. The fires. Millions dead. Millions more starving.

And yet those bastards up there are *dancing*.

As if everything is okay.

As if all this is normal.

As if it’s just another day.

“Unbelievable,” I mutter.

A ghostly white glow briefly illuminates the boat as it passes a giant *Do Not Enter* sign. The warnings are everywhere, cautioning people against entering the flooded city. The water is getting deeper—that’s the first problem. A few months ago, it was a foot or two below the

sign. Now, half the sign is gone. It won't be long before the whole city is underwater, penthouses and all. And then what?

My hand unconsciously brushes the gun tucked in my belt. I've never needed to use it, but I carry it just in case. The rising tide isn't the only risk. There are looters. Hijackers. Junkies. But what truly worries me aren't the dangers above the water. It's the ones below.

I've never seen the things, but I've heard about them, about what they do to anyone who strays too close to the water's edge. Nobody knows what they are or where they came from. There are plenty of reasonable theories, ranging from previously-undiscovered ocean predators to mutant strains of known species to long-extinct dinosaurs thawed from the Arctic ice. Then there are the crackpot rumors. Escaped genetic experiments. Government bioweapons. Mermaids. Aliens. Zombies.

I don't know what to think. Part of me wants to believe that the things don't exist at all, that they're just boogeymen that parents wield to warn their kids away from the water. But another part of me finds it hard to ignore the screams that echo through the city at night or the blooms of blood and viscera that sometimes bubble up from the depths.

A gruff voice breaks me out of my reverie. It's my business partner, Alex. He's standing with one foot perched on the bow of the boat like George Washington crossing the Delaware River. "Yo, Jeremy! Slow it down!"

The beam from a flashlight strobes in my eyes. I wave it away. "Relax. I'm on it."

I kill the motor. Its dying rumble ricochets off the walls of the urban canyon and rolls into the distance. The only sound that remains is the soft slap of water against the hull and the occasional cough from one of the twenty refugees crowded into the overloaded transport. The faint strains of what sounds like a waltz filter down from the penthouse above.

The boat bumps against the 46th-floor window of the skyscraper with a squeal like the death throes of a dying machine. Moving quickly,

Alex loops a heavy, mildew-blackened rope in through one broken window and out the next, lashing the boat to the wide steel beam that separates them. Then he turns and faces the passengers. Twenty hopeful faces look up at him expectantly. They're starving. Desperate. Scared. They'll believe anything.

And they have.

Alex clears his throat and projects his voice. "Alright, everyone, listen up," he says. "I'm gonna run inside to see if your rooms are ready. You're all paid up, right?" Heads nod. Alex points at the boy who talked to me earlier. "You too, little man?"

The boy looks up at his mother. She nods her approval. He gives Alex a thumbs up.

"Great!" Alex claps his hands together. "Then I'll be right back!" He grabs the rope ladder dangling against the side of the building, then smiles down at the faces below. "You're gonna love it here." With that, he climbs up the ladder and disappears through a window a few feet above the water.

Fucking asshole, I think. Why'd he have to do that, with the kid? What was the point? It was just cruel.

Alex seemed to have a twisted need to prove that he was still an alpha male. Still a captain of industry. Still at the top of the food chain.

In a way, he is.

We both are.

#

I've known Alex for years. We met as freshmen at Texas A&M University, joined the MBA program at Wharton together, traded commodities at the same investment bank, even dated some of the same girls. Alex was an asshole back then too.

I'm originally from Texas. I majored in geological engineering, with plans to join the oil industry when I graduated. But then, a recruiter for a major investment bank convinced me that I could make way more money trading oil futures in the stock market than I could make drilling holes in the Texas desert. The recruiter was right.

Alex grew up in Nebraska, spending most of his childhood on his family's cattle ranch. He, too, had heard the siren song of Wall Street calling after graduation, and he, too, ultimately fell back on what he knew best. For him, it was livestock.

Instead of herding cows on a farm in Nebraska, he was trading cattle futures from an office tower in Manhattan. It didn't matter to him. Either way, the livestock ended up in the same place: the slaughterhouse, then the dinner table. The beef industry was a big machine, a meat grinder that ingested living things on one end and spat gushers of money out the other. Alex was all too happy to collect it.

When the shit hit the fan, Wall Street was one of the first things to go. The economy collapsed. Commerce broke down. Supply chains disintegrated. Food became scarce for everyone but the wealthiest few. Housing too. Soon, it was every man for himself.

It was Alex who came up with the plan. To him, it was obvious what we needed to do to survive—it was just an extension of what he was doing before the world went to hell. It was the same machine, just smaller. And we'd have to operate both ends.

"Think of them like commodities," Alex had argued when he pitched the idea to me. "Like livestock."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It was insane. "Livestock? They're people!"

Alex walked over to the window of our darkened apartment, his shoes squelching on the waterlogged carpet as he crossed. The rug was sodden and mildewed. Black mold climbed the furniture and walls. The smell of rot was nauseating.

He looked out across the darkened cityscape. Like most of the city—except for the penthouses—our place had no electricity anymore. We were lucky enough that it was still above the water. It wouldn't be for long, though. The high tide was already sloshing against the bottom of our windows.

"This place is fucked," Alex said. He thumped the toe of his sneaker against the glass, at the waterline. "We need an agent. And agents cost money."

Alex was right. There were only so many buildings still above the water, and more were being flooded every day. An agent would find us a new place and would do the dirty work of evicting the current occupants. But that kind of service didn't come cheap. The higher the apartment, the higher the price. Plus, there was the cost of eviction and the resulting cleanup. If the occupants left peacefully, it wouldn't be too bad. But if they didn't, well, they would have to be *convinced*. The agents would do what they had to do to clear the property, but it could get messy. And that was expensive.

I joined Alex at the window and gazed out at the remains of the darkened skyscrapers. Their penthouse lights glowed like the tips of lit cigars. "You think it's true what they're eating up there?"

"I know it is."

"How?"

"You remember Gary Benjamin?"

I nodded. Gary Benjamin had been the head chef at Prime Cut, one of the city's premier steakhouses. Alex and I used to wine-and-dine our Wall Street clients over fist-sized cuts of Gary's divinely-marbled \$300 Wagyu steak. We had gotten to know him over the years. He was a smart guy. Talented. The best chef in the city, if you believed the critics that ranked that kind of thing.

"He's a personal chef now, in that one." Alex pointed at the black glass skyscraper towering over the drowned remains of 5th Avenue. "And he's buying."

#

I sit alone in the boat, waiting and listening. I've made the trip enough times to recognize the sounds of what's happening inside. It's always the same thing. First, there are murmurs of confusion and concern as the refugees begin to realize they have been lied to. Someone—usually a man—starts shouting in protest. There's a struggle, then gunshots. The screams follow. Sometimes there are more gunshots, sometimes not. It depends on how unruly things get.

Eventually, the panic simmers down to a steady drone of quiet weeping and whispered prayers. The adults are shuttled up the dank

stairwell to the 49th floor for immediate processing. The kids are herded into individual pens on the 48th, where they're held until they are needed. None of them really know what's in store for them. They're kept in the dark, literally and figuratively.

I've never been inside the building—I don't have the stomach for it. Alex does, though. Somehow, he's unfazed by the whole thing. He goes up to the kitchen to chat with Gary Benjamin as Gary preps the penthouse's next meal, knowing full well where the cuts of meat on the chopping block came from.

A flash of movement overhead catches my eye, and I look up. The boy from the boat—the one who spoke to me only minutes earlier—is in the window, pounding on the glass. His face is a mask of pure terror. Panicked, the boy looks over his shoulder, then down at me. Our eyes connect. The boy screams, his lips forming two words that I easily understand, even through the thick, soundproof glass.

"Help me!"

Before I can react, Alex appears behind the boy and grabs him by the arms. The kid struggles to break free, but Alex is too strong. He drags the boy kicking and screaming away from the window and into the darkness.

A few minutes later, the rope ladder rattles against the side of the building as Alex climbs down.

"Sorry about that," Alex says as he lowers himself onto the boat. "Damn kid slipped away when we weren't looking." He wipes his hands on the back of his pants, then begins untying the rope that secures the boat to the building. I notice a spray of blood splattered across the front of Alex's yellow rain slicker. Crimson streaks that look like finger tracks are smeared down one of his sleeves. "Good news, though," Alex continues as he coils the rope. He's beaming. "We're in."

I don't respond. I'm still staring at the bloodstains, my eyes unfocused.

"You hear what I said?" Alex asks. "They have a vacancy." He loops the coiled rope onto a rusted metal hook protruding from the side of the boat. "Isn't that great?"

"Yeah," I say quietly, groggily, as if waking from a deep slumber.

Alex frowns. "Hey. What's your problem?"

I look up at the window, where I saw the kid calling for help. It's dark. I glance back at Alex. "I'm done," I say. I stand up and press the outboard motor's electric starter. The engine sputters but doesn't catch.

"Done? Done what?"

I motion to the building. "This." I press the starter again. "Everything." The engine roars to life, spitting a cloud of pale gray exhaust into the air.

"Hang on, hang on," Alex shouts over the noise. "Shut that shit off."

I ignore Alex, revving the engine louder and piloting the boat away from the side of the building in a U-turn.

"Shut it off, I said!" Alex shouts over the noise. He pushes past me, slams his hand down on the starter, and kills the engine. "What the hell are you talking about, you're done?"

I look down at my shoes. "I don't want to do it anymore."

Alex glares at me for a moment, his arms crossed over his chest. The muscles in his jaw ripple as he clenches his teeth. Then he nods. His tone lightens. "Okay."

"Okay?" I lift my head, my eyebrows raised in surprise. "Really?"

"Sure. We'll just stop. And then, when our apartment floods, and one of those things comes swimming through the door looking for its next meal ... I'll make sure it knows where to find you."

My eyes narrow. "Fuck you."

"Don't you get it?" Alex asks. "We're *this* close to making it up there." He points to the penthouse.

I snort derisively. "They're not going to help us. They don't give a shit about us. We're just useful to them."

"Yeah, exactly. That gives us leverage. We can make a deal."

A laugh bursts from my lips, echoing off the buildings towering around us. It's a hollow, joyless sound. "They're dancing up there."

"So?"

"So, you don't get to where they are by *sharing*. Hell, that's why we're in this shitshow in the first place." I gesture to the water that has overtaken the city. "They didn't know when to stop, when enough was enough, and now *we're* stuck in this mess that *they* created. But them ...?" I look up at the penthouse. "They're still dry. They have electricity. Clean water. Food. They're above it all, literally."

"Exactly. Which is why we need to be up there too."

"But that's their whole scam! The American dream, right? If you just work for us hard enough, someday all this can be yours. It's bullshit. It was *always* bullshit."

"What're you, Karl Marx, now? Christ. Listen to you. You sound like a fucking communist."

"Look, do what you want," I sigh. "But like I said ... I'm done."

I try to step around Alex and back to my position by the engine. Alex moves to block my way. His lips curl away from his teeth in a snarl.

"No," he growls. "You're done when I *say* you're done." He moves forward until we're almost nose-to-nose. "Got it?"

I plant a forearm in Alex's chest, pushing him away to create space between us. "Back off," I warn.

"What're you gonna do?" Alex shoves me. "Huh?"

The blow unleashes something deep inside of me. Before I can stop myself, I thrust my head forward, crushing my forehead into Alex's face in a vicious headbutt.

Alex grunts as blood erupts from his busted nose. He spins around and bends forward over the boat's railing, leaking bright tendrils of blood into the jewel-green waves. "The hell, man! You brope by nose."

As Alex tries to staunch the bleeding with his shirt, the water beside the boat begins roiling and foaming. A cluster of ghostly white blurs materializes in the oily darkness, like wisps of gauze dancing lazily just below the surface.

Suddenly, a mottled, grayish-white hand shoots out of the water. It clutches Alex's arm and yanks, causing his midsection to crash against the railing and knocking the wind out of his lungs. Another hand shoots from the water. Flaccid ribbons of flesh are strung between its bony fingers like party streamers. Its yellowed nails dig into the shoulder of Alex's jacket and pull him headfirst into the water.

Alex's startled screams turn into muffled gurgling. His arms flail helplessly at the thing in the water. He tries to tear away the limbs gripping him, but the rotting flesh sloughs off in his hands.

Overcoming my initial shock, I lunge forward and grab Alex's belt, digging my heels into the bottom of the boat and leaning back, putting all my weight into pulling Alex away from whatever is attacking him. I can feel the thing tugging hungrily at my friend, trying to draw him fully out of the boat and under the waves.

My grip begins to slip. Veins in my neck and forehead bulge as I struggle to hang on. The muscles in my back and shoulder scream from the strain. The belt tears at my fingers.

Then, suddenly, the things in the water let go. With the resistance gone, I topple backward, landing flat on my back, with Alex's body on top of me. I roll to the side, gasping for breath, then push Alex away and struggle to my knees. I look down at my friend.

His face is gone.

All that's left is a shredded red-black hole, just a masticated mess of flesh and bone. The remnants of his lower jaw hang toward his neck, his bottom teeth poking up through the torn flesh of his lips and gums like broken seashells in a rising tide of gore. Torrents of blood bubble up from his severed arteries and pool in the cavity where his mouth used to be.

I recoil with revulsion, vomit spewing from my lips. Alex is making gurgling sounds, his legs and arms twitching weakly. Somehow, he's still alive. His head lolls toward me. Blood spills from his ruined face and swirls into the water around my boots. The mangled stump of his tongue pokes and wiggles obscenely over the entrance to his torn esophagus. He seems to be trying to say something. One of his arms

lifts, reaching in my direction, fingers grasping blindly. They find my arm and tighten around it.

My feet slip on the blood-slicked metal floor as I stumble backward from Alex's grip. I fall hard, my head cracking painfully into the edge of the bench behind me.

The floor under me begins to tilt, sending a noxious mixture of water, blood, and vomit sloshing past my cheek. Just above my head, a rotting hand grips the railing. Another arm emerges from the depths and latches a hand onto the rail, further tipping the vessel. Then another arm emerges. And another.

One of the arms is still clad in the moldering remnants of a long-sleeved shirt. It reaches for me. I kick at it, hearing the crunch of brittle bone and the squelch of rotting flesh as my boot connects with the outstretched appendage.

One of the moldering creatures manages to pull itself over the railing, toppling into the boat with a splash. It's a woman. Or was, at one point. Clumps of long, braided hair dangle from the thing's skull like seaweed. A tangled necklace is entwined around its exposed vertebrae. Shreds of what appeared to be a McDonald's uniform cling to its torso, a name tag still pinned to the shirt.

The realization of what I'm seeing washes over me. I never considered what happened to the millions of people who drowned in the city—the poor, the working class, the homeless—the ones who had been unable to escape the rapidly-rising floodwaters, their waterlogged bodies bloating with gases and floating toward the surface, only to be forever trapped by the ceilings of whatever room in whatever building they were in when they died.

I watch in numb horror as several once-human forms pull themselves out of the water, flopping like fish over the railing and into the boat. Their skin hangs like rags from their algae-blackened bones, catching on the rivets lining the railing and sliding off into doughy piles that remind me of sodden toilet paper spat from an overflowing sewer. Their flesh teems with worms. Barnacles crust their skulls. The low-tide smell of rot and decomposition fills my mouth and nose.

Once in the boat, the things slither hungrily on their bellies toward Alex's dying body, pulling themselves forward with their arms like infants who haven't yet learned to crawl. Their legs drag behind them, flaccid, seemingly useless.

I backpedal away from the things in front of me. Something grabs my shoulder, and I feel the icy wetness of necrotic flesh graze my neck. With a wild yelp, I jerk away, then spin to find more skeletal hands curling over the railing behind me. In the reflection of the black glass skyscraper, I can see a dozen or more of the things climbing up the side of the boat. More are surfacing from the water in all directions.

I'm surrounded.

I look up at the building. The rope ladder Alex descended only minutes earlier is still dangling from the broken 47th-floor window.

I climb onto one of the boat's wooden benches and reach for the ladder. My fingers graze the bottom rung. The ladder swings away from me. I reach for it again as it swings back in my direction, but I miss. The ladder seems to be getting shorter. Further away. There's no way I can reach it from where I'm standing.

I look down, remembering the rope Alex used to lash the boat to the building. Maybe I can leverage that to snag the ladder. I grab the rope, uncoil some slack, then turn back to the building.

The ladder is gone.

In the 47th-floor window just overhead, Gary Benjamin peers down at me.

"Gary!" I plead. "Help me!"

Gary doesn't respond. Instead, he steps back into the shadows, drawing the remaining length of the ladder up through the window.

"No! Gary! Wait!" I shout. "The ladder! Please!" I reach desperately for the retracting ladder as it disappears into the darkness, but it's too far gone.

I turn around, searching desperately for another way to escape. The creatures are swarming the boat from all directions. They have completely covered Alex's body and are feasting on his remains,

greedily tearing the flesh from his limbs with their teeth. Some plunge their bony hands into his body cavity, pulling out dripping handfuls of viscera and shoveling it into their disjointed maws. Others are crawling toward me, their teeth gnashing, their arms reaching.

There's nowhere for me to go. I only have one option.

My hand settles on the butt of my gun.

It's an unconscious movement driven by pure instinct. I had forgotten that I even had the thing. I draw it from my belt, aim at the advancing horde, and fire. The bullets pass cleanly through flesh and bone, doing nothing to slow the creatures' approach.

The things are almost upon me. I feel their hands close around my ankles. Around my calves. They began to pull at me, drawing me downward.

With a faraway stare, I press the barrel of the gun under my chin, then look up at the sky. My eyes fall on the penthouse. Its lights cast a soft white halo around the skyscraper's top floor. The lazy strains of the waltz have been replaced by something more uptempo, a swing. The silhouettes behind the shades twirl and spin, joining and separating and joining again, oblivious to the horror unfolding below.

I pull the trigger. The gunshot reverberates off the buildings' algae-slicked facades as my lifeless body tumbles forward into the waiting jaws of the undead horde.

In the penthouse, the silhouettes never miss a beat. They keep dancing, as if all this is normal.

As if it's just another day.

As if nothing has happened at all.

Warren Benedetto writes dark fiction about horrible people, horrible places, and horrible things. He is an award-winning author who has published over 100 stories, appearing in publications such as *Dark Matter Magazine*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *The Dread Machine*; on podcasts such as *The NoSleep Podcast*, *Tales to Terrify*, and *Chilling Tales For Dark Nights*; and in anthologies from *Apex Magazine*, *Tenebrous Press*, *Scare Street*, and many more. He also works in the video game industry, where he holds 35+ patents for various types of gaming technology. For more information, visit warrenbenedetto.com and follow @warrenbenedetto on Twitter and Instagram.



DECEMBER 21ST

JOHN BIAS

There is a blank screen with some finger smear marks and a light coat of dust. There are slight reflections of people on the blank screen that can scarcely be made out. Some people in the reflection are scientists wearing white lab coats, and the others are military personnel wearing dress uniforms. The sounds of "clicks" are heard as the screen comes on.

An image on the screen shows a doctor holding onto a desk as everything around him shakes violently. The doctor is a

white male mid to late 40s, slender, wearing a white lab coat, stained, dirty blue shirt, long brown messy hair, and an uneven beard. Behind the doctor, other scientists and security personnel are running for their lives as the shaking increases. Then from above, the ceiling starts tearing off the building. Debris starts to fall from the ceiling as security personnel aim their weapons and fire at the ceiling. The doctor turns around and tries to look up, and when he does, he sees a dark figure lifting the roof off. Security forces yell at everyone to evacuate the building and call the Army. The doctor finally stands up, looks up, and slowly removes his glasses. Now calm, with all the chaos around him, the doctor drops his glasses and says, "What have we done?"

The screen goes blank again, only showing slight reflections from the people in front of the screen. They start to talk among themselves as the "clicks" of buttons are heard again.

"Did someone watch this footage already?"

"Are there any more like the one on this footage?"

"Were there any files saved or bloodwork recovered from this facility?"

"How are we going to stop...."

"Okay...I think we are good. Restarting the video."

The screen comes back on, showing that same doctor again sitting at his desk. This time he is all cleaned up, showered, hair pulled back in a ponytail, and clean-shaven. The doctor presses a button on his keyboard, making a red dot appear at the upper right corner of the screen with the word "recording" right next to it. The doctor then sits back, smiles, takes a deep breath, then says, "Hi, my name is Dr. Aaron Norton, head scientist here at the CDC, Secret Military Branch. It is December 21st, 2025, with Christmas being four days away. I'm not sure if I am supposed to make these videos right now, but I must do something to save our record of what we have done and what is to come."

Dr. Norton then reaches over and grabs some files from his desk.

"Months ago, we were assigned to create a new strain of the coro-

navirus and to make sure that it only affected people with certain genetic markers and traits or susceptible to what they might be able to be affected with due to their genetic makeup. When I saw the list, I started to run my test as I was helping create this new strain. Once my results returned, I realized that this new strain would only affect African Americans. I asked myself who would want to create such a virus, but I put my head down and did it anyway."

Dr. Norton laughs a little and puts his head down. He shakes his head slightly, then continues, "For this, I am going to record news videos from around the nation to see how the infection is spreading when the virus comes in contact, and the final phase when either the body fights off the virus or death. This is only the beginning, and I think we all just signed our death certificates."

A news clip from a Texas news station was recorded automatically on the computer. The news anchor, a woman in her mid-thirties with long black hair, wearing a brown and white business dress suit, stands in front of a large screen while the banner flashes across the screen, "Breaking News!"

"Breaking news here out of Dallas, Texas, African Americans are contracting a new strain of the coronavirus. It makes them sick at first, overflowing the hospitals across the state, but after the flu-like symptoms, something happens that no medical expert can explain. Going out to Michael out at the hospital now."

Then the video cuts from the newsroom to the hospital, where they cover what is happening. Behind the news reporter, nurses and doctors run out of the hospital, and the police run in, armed with pistols and rifles. The reporter, an Asian-American with short black hair mid-thirties, holds one hand over one of his ears due to the noise and the other holding the microphone to his mouth.

"This is Michael out here at Dallas General, and it is chaos out here. The Police are on the scene, and SWAT just rolled up. We are not allowed inside. All we know is that medical personnel were injured, and some were killed when some of the admitted patients woke up and exhibited abilities that are, in their words, "unnatural." We are

not sure the status of the people inside, but...."

An explosion is heard as the cameraman pans his camera at the hospital. Then five windows are blown out with white smoke bellowing from them. Gunshots are heard afterward, with people screaming and ducking for cover behind whatever they can find.

* * *

The video skips and shows Dr. Norton again wearing the same clothes, pressing the keys on the keyboard. The doctor then sits back and takes a deep breath.

"Hi, this is Dr. Norton again here at the CDC, December 22nd. According to the orders from above, we here at the CDC released a new strain of the coronavirus yesterday, and the reports coming in are...I would say it would be amazing if that were the case. You just saw the Texas news clip, and it was incredible. The virus is not making African Americans sick, well at first it is, but then as soon as they recover after a few days in the hospital, something happens."

Dr. Norton shuffles through some files on his desk, then pulls one out.

"Seems like some African Americans are getting strange abilities after being affected. This first report reads that someone in Boston ran at a speed where no one saw them and stole everyone's wallet, then outran the police when they arrived on the scene. Second, in Los Angeles, another person was upset at a server in a fast-food restaurant, and then he suddenly combusted, burning everyone inside. Police arrived afterward and shot him dead. Last, reports all over the southeast states say someone is flying across the sky. They can't make out who."

The doctor drops the file, removes his glasses, rubs his eyes as he puts his glasses back on, and starts to press the keys on his keyboard. Another video pops up on the screen in the upper left-hand corner, but smaller.

"And today, military soldiers brought a...test subject for us to observe and draw blood. A 12-year-old girl named Tracy, no one knows where her parents are, and no one can explain how they came across

her. Here is the video footage from my camera attached to my lab coat when Tracy was brought in.

Dr. Norton walks up to the military forces on the screen's small video in the upper left-hand corner. They are all in camouflage uniforms, black bulletproof vests, and armed with pistols and rifles. Tracy is a small African American girl with them, her natural black hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing a pair of jean shorts and a yellow and blue tank top shirt.

"How is she?" asked Dr. Norton, "And where did you find her?" All the military forces are standing around Tracy as if in a daze.

"We found the information about where she was, and her parents agreed to let her go. Now she is here with us. Here you go."

The soldier spoke like a robot and reached Tracy's hand toward Dr. Norton. Dr. Norton stands there confused as he takes Tracy's hand. The military forces then turn around at the same time and walk away. Dr. Norton watches them leave with a confused look, then leans down towards Tracy.

"Hey, how are you...." Tracy pulls her hand away from him and steps back. She does not look at Dr. Norton in the face but stares at the floor and keeps her hands behind her back. Dr. Norton stands straight up, takes a breath, and smiles, "It's okay. No one is going to hurt you here."

The small video goes away on the monitor and shows Dr. Norton.

"As you can see, they were acting weird...as if..." said Dr. Norton, "I'm not sure what that was about, but I ensured Tracy that she would be taken care of and no harm would come to her. She was afraid of where she was, so we had to ensure that we gained her trust before anything. She didn't want anyone to hold her hands, so we led her to where she needed to be. We took blood samples and put her in her room to ensure it did not feel like jail. As for the rest of the country, things are getting interesting, to say the least."

A news clip from a national news station cuts in with an African American male with short black hair, wearing a gray and white busi-

ness suit, sitting at an anchor desk, holding a tablet.

"Breaking news. Pandemonium has taken over nationwide as states try to deal with the infection rate of this new coronavirus, which only affects African Americans. Some states are taking measures to ensure that the public is safe and to treat whoever is infected. Other states take drastic measures to what they say for the public's safety. But according to the videos we receive, that is not the case. For the viewers at home, we are warning you that some of the footage is graphic."

The video cuts to Jacksonville, FL, where someone is recording from their homes, showing the state and local police walking the street with full tactical riot gear, shields, pepper spray, batons, and shotguns. Following them is an armored vehicle with an officer not manning a water cannon but an M240 machine gun. They are walking through a predominantly black neighborhood, with one of them speaking into a loudspeaker.

"Stay inside! For your safety and ours, stay in your homes! If you come out, we will use force!"

"Please, help me!" a woman's plea is heard as all the police turn to see where it is coming from.

This African American woman is holding a six-year-old girl in her arms, and she is barely unresponsive, lightly twitching, and her eyes rolled to the back of her head. The woman is in a panic. Her face is sweaty, mixed with the constant tears, holding out her child to the police.

"Get inside!" yelled one of the officers as a volley of rubber bullets struck the woman, her child, and the entrance to her house.

Glass shatters, and puffs of smoke form from the ricochets hitting the door seal as the woman tries to cover up her child. Then the firing stops as the footage pans over to the armored vehicle, pulled backward, but the tires spin, trying to go forward. All the police on foot turn to see what is going on when the armored vehicle slowly starts lifting off the ground. The police open fire, but the footage cannot tell what they are shooting at. Then the armored vehicle is thrown forward at the police, crushing most of them while others jump out of the way

last minute. The footage finally shows an African American woman standing in the middle of the street with one hand held up towards the police. The person recording tries to close in on the woman, but the armored vehicle explodes, and the footage cuts to black.

The video clips return to the national news station as the news anchor sits there for a moment, then recollects his thoughts and looks into the camera.

"We are receiving reports that this virus is manufactured and was released to the public by our government. We still have no word from the White House as they are staying quiet, only releasing a statement saying they are working with all state officials on this matter."

* * *

The video skips and shows Dr. Norton again in the same clothes, unshaven and with hair no longer in a ponytail.

"Hi, it's now December 23rd, and we are no longer allowed to leave the facility." Dr. Norton said with fear in his voice, "Things are getting out of control outside as more and more African Americans are contracting the new coronavirus, and the same result happens.

They get these abilities, and all hell breaks loose. The government doesn't know what to do. State and local authorities are gearing up for war, calling in the National Guard. At this rate, every African American will be infected with the virus in one or two days, and we cannot determine what abilities they will get."

Dr. Norton types on his keyboard and brings up the small screen showing another video.

"This video went viral worldwide, not just across the country." Dr. Norton says while shaking his head, "This is pretty graphic, and I can't help but feel responsible for this."

The video shows police body cam footage of them approaching a car with a black family inside. With one police officer on each side, the one with the body camera footage heads toward the driver's side of the car. They look inside and see a family of four African Americans with bags on the floor in the backseat. A nine-month-old baby and a

four-year-old boy are in the back seat, the mother and father in the front.

"Do you know there is a curfew in effect, Sir." the police officer asked the driver while his partner looked in the vehicle.

"Yes." the driver replied, "I was bringing my family to my mother-in-law to stay safe. Once we are there, we will stay inside."

"Hey! What's going on back there!" the partner yelled as both police officers looked in the back seat, and the four-year-old holding a water bottle started to freeze.

"Look out!" yelled the partner as he drew his weapon and opened fire. The officer on the driver's side quickly runs to the back of the car and draws his weapon. The partner empties his magazine inside the vehicle and goes behind the car with the other officer.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" the officer with the body camera asks, "Nothing was wrong!"

"Did you see that?" asked the other officer, "They were infected. I was in fear for my life. I was in fear for my life."

The officer repeats himself as they both start to hear something coming from the vehicle. The nine-month-old baby is crying but hears nothing else coming from the car. Both officers are afraid to reapproach the vehicle.

Dr. Norton stops the video and sits in shock and disbelief. He starts to speak, but nothing comes out at first, with a loss for words. "I'm sorry." Dr. Norton says as he turns off the camera.

The camera turns back on, shows Dr. Norton pressing the buttons on his keyboard again, and brings up the small screen in the upper left-hand corner.

"But today we have another...test subject, yes, I hate calling them that, but I don't know what else to call them. This is James, a 17-year-old teenager they caught interfacing his cell phone with a cell tower. I'm not sure how he was doing that, but I guess he received some super-intellect. But the same military forces that brought in Tracy brought him in, and this is the other strange thing that happened."

The military forces bring in James, tall for his age, medium built,

with neatly braided black hair, blue jeans, and a black sweater on the small screen. The security forces have him handcuffed behind his back as they talk among themselves. Dr. Norton walks up to them and points at the young man.

"Is this the young man connecting to the cell tower?"

"Yeah, it is." replied the soldier who had James by his arm, "Here is the cell phone he was using. He did some rework on that thing. We have no clue how he did it."

The soldier then uncuffs James and pushes him toward Dr. Norton.

"Here you go, not our problem anymore. And it looks like we will be reassigned due to the chaos going on elsewhere. Good working with you, Doc."

The security forces turn around in different ways and start to walk off.

"Wait!" yelled Dr. Norton, "Do you want an update about the young girl you brought in, Tracy?"

The soldier turns around, confused, "Tracy? Who the hell is that? You may want to get some fresh air, Doc."

The soldiers walk away as Dr. Norton stands there with James, not saying a word but slightly smiling.

"Are you okay, young man?" asked Dr. Norton, placing his hand on his shoulder of James. "Yeah, I'm good." James replied cheerfully, "I'm used to getting roughed up by police anyway. They'll get what's coming to them. What's the word for that? That's right, karma."

The small screen disappears as Dr. Norton scratches his head and shakes it slightly.

"I'm not sure how to explain that...." Dr. Norton said, "But...after talking with James, he seemed like a very good person and had a good attitude about what was happening. We drew blood from him and set him up in a room right down the hall from Tracy. I looked at the device he had; it was a cell phone that he had updated himself. I couldn't find out what he was looking for and why. I'll ensure that the staff brings them dinner and keep an eye out for them."

* * *

Another video clip from the same national news network shows the same news anchor, unshaven, wearing the same clothes as before. He takes a breath, nods, and makes a confident appearance.

"We are still here and plan to keep you updated with everything going on. We here are stuck in the building, not allowed to go outside due to what is happening. And the local police ordered our security detail inside the building not to let out any African Americans, including me, because we might catch the virus. We are bringing you footage from Texas, where there is an all-out war between the National Guard, state, and local police versus some of the infected in that state. The other news station that was our competitor had to leave their station due to constant attacks and is now in Texas. Here is some of their footage that was just released."

The video cuts to this white news anchor, wearing his network's news jacket in his late forties, with short brown hair that is not combed. Around him, people run, shoot, and scream as he is angry and distraught.

"We are in Houston, where the great state of Texas is the last hope for America! Please don't believe what the other news stations tell you about our government doing this. That is absurd and baseless! I am here with law enforcement, fighting to establish law and order as all the states should. Here is the SWAT Commander of the Houston Police Department. Commander, how are the efforts going?"

The news anchor turns around where the SWAT Commander is wearing all-black coveralls, goggles, and a mask. He lowers his mask, which only when that is revealed that he is white.

"The efforts are going well! We asked every American to bear arms and fight with us against the infected who want to take over our great state! That will not happen here in Texas! We are opening fire on every one of color which we see in the street, so if you don't want to get shot, stay home!"

Behind him are police and civilians in tactical equipment, rifles,

and vests. They are all nodding and cheering what the Commander said and yelling their views on the matter.

"Yeah. This is America!"

"God is punishing all of you in his special way!"

"Don't mess with Texas!"

The video cut back to the news anchor sitting there speechless to what he had just heard. He takes a breath, calms down, and relaxes.

"Not only Texas, but Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas are doing the same thing. But instead of trying to solve the issue, contain the disease, and help the infected, they are shooting first. Which in turn is the reason why they are under siege."

* * *

The video skips again and shows Dr. Norton in his office, late at night, still unshaven and now unbathed. In the background, all the lights are off, and no one is around.

"This is Dr. Norton again, it is December 24th. Christmas Eve, and I have just seen some footage I would like to share with you."

Dr. Norton quickly presses the buttons on his keyboard as the small screen appears in the upper left-hand corner.

"For some reason, I wanted to get up and check the security camera footage recording the doors of Tracy and James's room. I found some activity that I need clarification on was alarming or not. Therefore, I'm making a video log about it."

The small screen brings up security camera footage from the hallway of Tracy and James's rooms. From an overhead angle shot from the camera, a female nurse brings Tracy a plate of food for dinner. The nurse enters the room, but minutes pass, and she does not come out. Then the nurse comes out with Tracy, holding hands. Following the camera views down the hall, the nurse and Tracy make it to a workstation in an office space. The nurse takes a laptop from the office, an internet cable, and a power cable. Then the camera footage shows her and Tracy walking back down the hallway and in front of James's room. The nurse opens James's door, hands him everything

she took out of the office, then reaches into her pocket and hands him her cell phone. James takes everything and closes the door behind him. The nurse then turns around, walks Tracy to her room, closes the door behind her, and walks away.

The small screen disappears, and Dr. Norton sits with his hand across his mouth. "I'm not sure what just happened." Dr. Norton says with confusion, "And I guess Tracy trusted the nurse well enough to hold her hand, which she did not let anyone do since she got here. Except for the security forces when she was first brought in. I will report the nurse first thing in the morning, but this is crazy. At the same time, things are deteriorating across the country. We received reports that African Americans have organized and taken over certain cities. Police departments in St. Louis, Baltimore, Minnesota, and Los Angeles have surrendered. New York and Miami want to start internment camps, and the President is in talks about national martial law. I haven't been to bed yet, so I must get some sleep. Hopefully, tomorrow is quieter due to it being Christmas."

* * *

The video cuts to the national news network where the same news anchor, wearing the same clothes, sits at his news desk.

"As we approach Christmas, I can only bring you more dysfunction and death as the country spirals out of control. But for some surprising news, the Mississippi governor has held a press conference jointly with some affected African Americans. Here is the footage."

The video cuts to the Governor of Mississippi, standing at a podium, and two African Americans on each side of him. One is a male, tall in his mid-twenties, wearing clothes with grease stains, and a female, in her mid-twenties, is wearing the uniform of an officer who hands out parking tickets. The Governor smiles and tries to laugh a little but is uncomfortable at the same time.

"The great state of Mississippi is happy to announce that we are working with the infected to settle into a peaceful solution. After an unannounced and... forceful meeting with these two fine citizens, I called

back all law enforcement. We will now work with everyone to help out all infected and injured. I would call ALL white citizens to please put down your weapons and let the state officials do their job. But for those who still want to cause trouble, and coming from out of state, if you are caught...I can't help after that. God Bless."

The Governor turns around and reaches out his hand for a handshake to the African-American man, but he keeps his arms folded. The Governor gently pats him on his shoulder and walks away from the podium.

The video cuts to Texas, where the same group fighting in Houston is now pushed to Galveston, Texas. The ground has been raised and trapped all law enforcement, the National Guard, civilian militia, and the news network reporting on the beach. The reporter looks lost, confused, and scared as everyone around him is panicking and shooting their weapons aimlessly.

"We have been pushed back to the water with no escape. We are not sure where this wall of dirt and rock came from, but as soon as we were pushed this way, it rose from the ground and stopped at least 60-65 feet in the air. We have called for assistance, and no one answered the call except for a ship that is on its way now. The plan is for us to be relocated for the time being out on the water until we can find safe passage back to the United States."

"Look! There is the ship!" someone behind him yelled.

The camera pans and focuses on the ship heading in their direction at the horizon. Some of the people start to cheer as the news reporter takes a sigh of relief and looks back at the camera.

"That is good news. To everyone watching, we are the resistance. We will bring America back to what it once was. This country will not fall into the hands of the black..."

"Where is the water going?" someone asked behind him.

The camera pans down and sees the water pulling away from the beach. The camera follows the water until it sees the ship coming to get them closer than before, and it is on top of a large wave heading in their direction. Panic ensues again as everyone doesn't know what

to do next.

"Find the person who is doing this and kill them!"

"There has to be someone we can talk to! This is going too far!"

"I'm sorry! Please!"

The reporter looks at the camera, unsure what to say, as the camera continues to pan over to everyone in a panic. The wave is getting closer, some people shoot themselves in the head, and others try climbing the rock wall to safety.

"Look!" another person yells as the camera pans in that direction and extends its view to see.

On top of one of the buildings, two African Americans are standing on top of it. It is too far to identify, but from the camera, you can tell that one of them is holding their hand out while the other looks like they are drinking a beer. People are yelling and waving at them frantically.

"Get their attention!"

"We surrender! Please let us go!"

"I can't get a good shot! Too far!"

The camera pans back to the reporter when the giant vessel crashes onto the beach, and the water engulfs everyone.

Back in the national news network, the African-American news anchor just watched what happened and shook his head.

"We are sorry for what happened to that news network and all those people on that beach. But in the end, we can ask if they did that to themselves. Only time will...."

The news anchor's arm phased through the news desk as he sat there frozen, eyes wide, and inhaled deeply. He pulls his arm back and quickly stands up as some people in the studio scream and run. He looks around, not knowing what to do next, then walks forward, phasing through the desk towards the camera. The video cuts to a still picture with the message, "We'll be right back."

* * *

The video skips again, and Dr. Norton looks like he was first seen

when the video came on the first time. In the background, security personnel are running around directing others. Scientists are running around as well with files and cases in their arms. Flashing red lights are seen throughout the floor as Dr. Norton sits unphased in front of the camera.

"This is Dr. Norton, and it is Christmas day." Dr. Norton says calmly, "It was all a setup, the whole time, it was all planned. Tracy's abilities were to control people using that first initial physical contact. That is why she was able to purposely get in this building, have the nurse do what she did, and early this morning, right after I went to sleep, she had the nurse and some of the security personnel escort her and James out of the facility."

Dr. Norton looks down and holds his calm as the building shakes again. He looks up, refocusing his attention on the camera. At the same time, people continue to scream in the background.

"And then with James, I think he was the mastermind behind this. Whatever he did, he was able to access all our files and the government files as well. And it looks like he used the cell phone we recovered when he was first caught as a transmitter to access my computer since I left it on my desk next to it."

Dr. Norton lifts the cell phone to the camera showing it again, then drops it on the desk. He starts to slowly rock back and forth in his chair, shaking his head at the same time.

"With that, James put all the files about the new virus on the internet and the plans for it. That was the spark that started everything this Christmas day. He also blocked all codes to all nuclear launch sites across the country. When that happened, the following across the country happened simultaneously."

Dr. Norton brings up the small video in the upper left-hand corner of the screen. The small video shows Air Force One stationed in Andrews Air Force Base in Laurel, Maryland, in flames. The footage skips and shows a Navy Destroyer, somehow thrown into the White House and the entire area on fire. Florida, Alabama, and Arkansas followed Mississippi and drew down their military and law enforce-

ment presence, working with the infected and stopping the violence.

The small screen goes off, and the background chaos worsens. Dr. Norton wipes a tear from his face.

"We did this to ourselves, and I went along with it." Dr. Norton says with sadness, "Who wouldn't be upset when your government tries to kill you by the millions? And last, the cell phone was a beacon of some kind, and it stopped transmitting a couple of minutes before what you hear and see happening now. And that is why everyone is trying to evacuate as soon as possible."

Suddenly, the building starts to shake. Dr. Norton holds on to his desk and the shaking increases. Then, the ceiling begins to be torn off the building. Debris starts to fall from the ceiling as security personnel aim their weapons and fire at the ceiling. The doctor turns around and tries to look up, and when he does, he sees a dark figure that cannot be made out, lifting the roof off. Security forces yell at everyone to evacuate the building and call the Army. The doctor finally stands up, looks up, and slowly removes his glasses. Now calm, with all the chaos around him, the doctor drops his glasses and says, "What have we done?". The dark figure, now looking like an African American male wearing coveralls as if he works at a car maintenance shop, lifts off the roof entirely. Sunlight enters the facility as Dr. Norton holds up one of his hands to block the sun. Then the roof is slammed down in the facility, including Dr. Norton, and the camera cuts off.

The monitor goes blank, only showing the slight reflections of the scientists and military personnel looking at it. No one speaks right away, with an eerie silence across the room.

"What are we going to do?"

"Do we have enough resources?"

"A Russian sub was taken out of the ocean and thrown back to Russia."

"That made China stand down quickly."

"The infection rate and uprisings are going on in London, France, Germany, and most of the African continent."

"What are we going to do? The President is still missing."

The monitor cuts on by itself, first static, then a black screen. A yellow line appears, blinking on and off like a computer screen. A word starts slowly typing across the screen in capital, bold, underlined letters. It ends with an exclamation point, and the word begins to flash on and off the screen.

"SURRENDER!"



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Press



THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

DEL GIBSON

They've come from the fourth dimension, the Hollow Earth at the centre of the world. It's a place where the ungodly were banished by God from Earth. The abominations, the children of the forsaken, the Nephilim. The earth-bound cryptids have made an

alliance with the creatures from the Hollow Earth, in order to conduct the complete annihilation of the human race, so they can walk the earth again, unbound—they're sick of hiding from humans. Now they're free from their confinement, extermination of the human species has begun.

It started with the television.

Toby channel surfs with the remote control on what should be an ordinary morning. Breaking news flashes across the screen. In the USA, China, Russia and the UK, military planes and fighter jets are chasing spacecrafts across their skies. Toby can't believe what he's seeing, so he flicks quickly through the channels, hoping it's only a film and not real footage. But each network is reporting the same catastrophe.

He's devastated absorbing the horrendous images as cryptids burst out of the ground through fissures in the earth, emerging from mountains, crevices and caves, surfacing from deep underwater trenches, lakes, and cracking through glacial ice.

It's occurring too fast for the newsfeed to catch up. Toby sits on the edge of his seat, mesmerised by the bombardment of graphic pictures, he doesn't even notice Maddy padding into the living room.

"What's that dad, is it a movie?" She looks up at the clock, it's 7:35am. "Shouldn't you be getting ready for work?" she asks, staring at the carnage on the television screen.

"Something terrible is happening," Toby states miserably, without even a glance at his fifteen-year-old daughter. A bible on his lap is open to Revelations.

Maddy plonks down beside Toby and together they watch as the tragedy unfolds across the planet.

The news reports that mass graves are being dug and filled to the brim with the broken and the dead, death lines the streets, skyscrapers are shredded, and famous landmarks are being obliterated.

Giants crush everything in their path. People capture Bigfoot with their cell phone cameras from different countries; the Himalayan

Yeti, the Mande Barung in India, the Sasquatch across America. The Chupacabra have grown sick of feasting on animal blood, they crave human blood instead. They're morbid looking little scaly reptilians with spikes on their backs.

Outrageous winged creatures consume the heavens. Moth Men dart in and out of the clouds, plunging their claws into bone and flesh before flying out of view. Dragons pluck people off the ground with gnashing teeth, destroying their prey with enormous talons.

Skinwalkers morph in and out of form, from animals, into monstrous looking humans with dead eyes and deformed features. In Australia the Bunyip, who had to feast on human blood under the cover of darkness, can now walk freely alongside the Lizard people; who were here before humans even existed.

Nothing yet has been reported here in New Zealand at the bottom of the world. *Thank God*, Toby thinks, he's convinced it won't reach them, but it doesn't stop his stomach from doing summersaults of doubt and terror. His face pales, and Maddy looks like she's about to throw up. Her cold hand clings to his as they watch on unable to peel their eyes away from the screen. Thunder crashes above the house, rattling the windows.

All of a sudden, one by one, the channels blink off, replaced with static and fuzzy white dots.

"What the hell?" Toby yells.

"Check the internet," Maddy suggests.

Toby returns from the study looking confused and slightly shaken.

"There's no internet." He collapses defeated on the couch. "Wait, I'll check my cell phone," he says, retrieving it from his hoodie pocket. "Fuck! It says the network's out." He throws it onto the other couch, and sighs icy breaths tinged with dread. The hair raises on his body and goosebumps tingle his skin.

Suddenly, the floor beneath them rumbles, then the house begins to shake. They dive under the round dining room table and hold tight to its old oak legs. The room is rolling and shaking, objects crash and shatter around them, and heavy furniture topples over. It's brutally

loud and it doesn't stop for a full five minutes.

"The stereo dad, they might be reporting the news."

"Good thinking," he replies, as they crawl out from under the table.

Toby shifts over to the stereo that's now sitting lopsided on the floor, he plugs it in and switches it on. *"...Lake Taupo...major eruption...super volcano...cataclysmic...creatures coming out of the water..."* The stereo crackles, then it shuts off completely.

"The power's out," Toby announces frustrated, flicking on and off the light switch to be sure. He grabs the car keys off the hook and pulls Maddy towards the front door.

Outside, a poisonous yellow hue smothers the land, and it reeks of sulphur.

"We need to find somewhere safe to go," he says.

They rush over to the car, but it doesn't start.

"Sweetheart, we have to run for it, okay?" He cups her face in the palms of his hands. "You know the park we used to go to behind the school? There's a bunker, we'll go there, it'll be safer." Toby hopes.

They dash out of the car, and run for their lives. People are rushing around in the midst of the chaos. Toby's beside himself with worry—but for the sake of Maddy—he has to rein in his emotions.

They pass the school and enter the wooded area around the back. When they make it to the playground they find dead bodies lying on the ground, blood covers the surfaces of the play equipment, and skin is hanging from tree branches. Body parts litter the grass.

Maddy screams. Toby claps his hand around her mouth and pulls her behind a tree. "Get down!"

They lay on their stomachs upon the cold wet grass, and watch in horror as dozens of humanoid creatures walk through the park. They're horrendous looking, with goats heads and bodies of men. The sounds they make prickles chills through Toby—he's quivering as he hides Maddy against his chest.

"Don't look. Sing a song inside your head and cover your ears. What about that one from Ariana Grande...what's it called again?"

He's trying to distract her.

"No Tears Left to Cry," she mumbles, singing it inside her mind.

Nestled amongst dead leaves and rotten roses, gorse bush thorns poke into their flesh. One of the Goat Men walking on two legs only metres away, sniffs at the air with its elongated nose. It pauses, turns in their direction, but fortunately it passes by.

Toby watches in horror as a family runs across the park with hideous creatures chasing them—they look like Bigfoot. One of them attaches itself to the human adult male, ripping him in half. Toby can't watch anymore, so he closes his eyes tight. Although he can't see, he can clearly hear what's happening—none of the family survive.

"Let's go while they're distracted," Toby whispers.

They crawl on hands and knees deeper into the thicket. When they reach the edge of the field, dozens of cryptids are gathering. Toby doesn't think they'll be able to make it to the bunker after all. But they have to try, so, they forge ahead.

As they're creeping their way around the field—avoiding the beasts—something unbelievable occurs that stops them cold. The sky is full of alien spacecrafts zooming and whizzing about so fast, there are too many to count. They're all different shapes and colours. To Toby's surprise the alien ships are shooting Lazer beams down upon the cryptids, blasting them into globs and mounds of slush.

The two get up and sprint, and have nearly reached their destination, when suddenly a bright blue beam of light engulfs them. Toby can feel his feet leave the ground, he's holding tight to Maddy's hand as they're lifted into the spacecraft as if by magic.

Toby's heart sinks because he doesn't want them to die this way. He won't let them do anything to harm Maddy, he'll fight for their lives until his very last breath. But, he's astonished to see there are other humans on board. Fear is vivid in their eyes, it's drawn upon their faces. Some are crying, while others look lost and forlorn.

"What the hell is happening?" Toby asks out loud, to no one in particular.

"It's okay, they're here to save us," says an old man, as Toby and

Maddy sit beside him on a row of empty seats.

“What happened?” Toby asks the old man, Maddy is leaning her head on her dad’s shoulder, weeping in silence.

“The end of the world as we know it,” the old man replies. “It’s the Apocalypse they say.”

“Where are they taking us?” Toby asks.

“I don’t know,” says the man.



Del Gibson lives in Wellington, New Zealand. She is an author of dark paranormal horror. Gibson has 26 short stories published by Reedsy Publishing. Gibson has also had her short horror stories published in several horror Anthologies; *Flash of the Dead*, *The Flash of Fangs*, *Wicked Flashes of Fantasy*, and *Flashes of Nightmares*, published by Wicked Shadow Press, in both eBook and paperback. As well as *Remains to be Told*, published by Lee Murry, 6-time winner of the Bram Stoker awards—this is also available in eBook and paperback. Gibson runs a popular Facebook group called HORROR CENTRAL. She regularly collaborates with You Tube Podcasters where her short stories are read out by narrators, she also reviews horror movies on You Tube Livestreams.

Gibson volunteers as a remedial reading teacher at the local primary school in her spare time. When Gibson isn’t writing, she is researching anything and everything true paranormal, horror, and true crime content.



THE WRENCH

SARAH HOZUMI

It always started the same. The lights would flicker before the sirens from what speakers remained would wail out their warnings. Usually, the bombings were in the next town over, at least, and you could get away with just closing the curtains and going about your day after hearing the first sirens.

There was no warning this time, though, and a group of bombs fell so close to where I lived that my apartment building shook. I got to watch my books toss themselves off my shelves just before the power went out.

I grabbed my phone and charger before running down the two flights of stairs to the main entrance of my building. As another bomb hit closer, I crossed the street to the ammunitions factory, knowing they'd still have power thanks to their fleet of generators buried in the ground. Hopefully it meant I could plug my phone into one of their outlets. I needed that phone to work. It was a stupid decision, now that I think about it, because the enemy had probably been aiming for the factory in the first place, but I figured the builders must have extensively fortified it. I just needed to get in there for a few minutes to charge my phone.

* * *

No one went into the weapons ammunitions factory – no one needed to. Robots threw together every bullet, every shell, every drone, all of which were then dumped directly from the assembly line into the back of an armored vehicle. The vehicles then promptly drove the supplies to the front lines. Even the longtime security guard was replaced by cameras and sensors, making the entire factory automated. As long as the supplies kept coming, no one gave the ammunitions factory a second thought.

There were about ten doors leading into it, along with a row of cargo doors at the back for the armored trucks. I tried prying the smaller doors open, putting my back to the cameras pointing at the doors as best I could, but it looked like without a fingerprint the door liked, I wouldn't get in. A few more explosions shook the ground as the night sky was temporarily illuminated with bursts of fire, but my eyes were on the ninth door, which slowly swayed open with a soft click as sparks flew off the touchpad next to it.

Inside looked like a manmade galaxy, with the circular lights on the hundreds of robots manufacturing the ammunitions glowing red or blue in the dark as a humming dominated the air. It was enough light, at least, that I could fumble my way through the massive building without tripping over too many cords and robotic arms.

It was impossibly cold despite the heat the robots were surely generating, but I only needed to be in there long enough to charge my

phone. I could handle the cold for a few minutes.

I ran my hand along the walls as I crawled on the floor but felt no familiar bump of an outlet. How were the machines powered? I took my hand from the wall and made my way to a robotic arm along one of the many assembly lines that was illuminated like a handful of blue fireflies had taken a liking to the metal.

A quick feel of the arm led me to a thick cord with cold little ridges, which made me think maybe it was coated in steel probably to protect it from curious rodents. Marveling at how much thought had gone into the factory when my apartment sometimes didn't get running water, I followed the cord all the way to the floor, where it stopped. Pulling on it did nothing.

If only I could see. My phone was nearly dead, but I decided to sacrifice its last few breaths to turn on the flashlight feature. Maybe there was an outlet on the floor.

The harsh glare spotted the problem just as another explosion outside caused the suspended robots to sway, groaning like the bowels of a ship in a storm. I grabbed hold of the arm whose power I was trying to steal to steady myself, then focused the flashlight back on the cord.

It went right through the floor. My best guess was the engineers had cut tiny holes just big enough for the steel cords to go through to meet the power source that was probably miles underground. Of course, whoever made the factory would try to stop people like me from coming in and just unplugging everything.

A brilliant thought beyond all brilliant thoughts struck as my phone lit up a few feet ahead of me just before it died. There was a little office the security guard had worked in before he'd been fired a few months before. If anywhere would have an outlet, that office would.

It was completely dark inside, of course, and the absence of the robot's tiny lights made it all the more impossible to see anything, but considering the explosions were getting louder, I didn't have the luxury of taking my time feeling around to figure out what all was in there. Instead, I pushed a rolling chair out of the way and started frantically moving my hands along the wall for anything that could possibly give

me hope.

At last, my fingers brushed against an outlet that still had something plugged into it. I didn't even care what it was, I yanked the cord out with more force than it needed, and a coffee maker from above went flying at the wall behind me with a desperate crash that rang out above the humming machines. I expected some sort of alarm to go off, but nothing happened as I crouched on the floor and held my breath.

It was so cold I couldn't stop shaking, which meant it took me longer than I wanted to fish the phone's charger out of my pocket and plug it into the wall. Would the outlet even have power going to it anymore? My heart stopped as I managed to jab the other end of the cord into the bottom of my phone and stared down at my phone's screen.

At first, nothing happened.

"C-Come on," I muttered through chattering teeth. "Come on."

I had a friend living in New Zealand, and she said she could get me a ticket out of there. There was some sort of humanitarian plane leaving for New Zealand from an airstrip that was about an hour's drive from my apartment, and my friend knew someone on that plane who could sneak me on board. The problem was, I didn't know when the plane would be there. It was beyond dangerous hanging around the airstrip for longer than I needed to, so I had to know the exact time. She was supposed to text me sometime today with the information.

There! Life to my phone! It'd taken a few seconds for my phone to recognize I had finally plugged it into a power source, but it beeped once, then the screen went dark except for an icon declaring it was charging.

Too cold to stay still, I took to pacing the office while I waited for my phone to gather enough power to come back to life. I started thinking about New Zealand while I moved.

New Zealand was a set of islands that had so far managed to stay out of the growing war, and my friend had told me it was peaceful

there.

“It’s nothing but sheep,” she’d said two nights before during one of our many calls. Instead of being surrounded by robots creating bullets and bombs, I’d be surrounded by rolling hills and sheep. That sounded nice. I tried to picture the long blades of green grass and a brilliant blue sky that wasn’t choking on plumes of black smoke. It sounded nice.

My phone beeped again, and I realized with a start that it’d booted up on its own. The beep was to tell me I’d gotten a message.

With hands shaking from the cold and now profound hope that this was the message I so desperately needed, I tapped the phone to access the message.

Don’t come here! Explosions everywhere!

The timestamp suggested my friend had sent it about an hour before.

For a long time, I stared at the message in complete incomprehension.

Explosions? What did she mean by that? New Zealand was staying out of the war. It was famous for its neutrality, as being a beacon for refugees. What was she talking about?

Of course, the internet had been knocked out thanks to the fresh series of bombs. That also meant I couldn’t just text my friend back and ask for any sort of clarification. My only hope was that I could sit there, fully charge my phone, then leave in search of some sort of internet connection so I could reach her.

There came a flash of white light like the sun had crashed through the factory’s fortified ceiling, then a wall of heat knocked me flat. I’d been in enough bombings to know I needed to cover the back of my neck and get in the fetal position to block shrapnel from hitting anything important, but I’d never been in one so entirely devastating. Smoke choked the air out of the building as wave upon wave of fire raked against my back. The thick metal desk in the security office had fallen over just in front of me, and it acted like a pathetic shield from the worst of the heat.

That didn't matter, though, if I couldn't breathe. I started gagging, my lungs begging for any drop of air, while my mind took me to fields of green grass with purple flowers I didn't even know if New Zealand had.

A great whirring noise filled the air, drowning out even the sound of the fire trying to eat its way through the highly flammable ammunitions and cords powering the machines, and what little air was left in the factory was sucked out through vents I guessed were in what was left of the roof and walls. There was a beat of complete silence as even the machines had shut off and I dry heaved for air, then outside air from the hole in the roof came pouring in to fill the sudden vacuum.

My lungs greeted the air with such desperation that I dissolved into a coughing fit, my ribs squeezing against my sides until I vomited on the floor. I had no idea what had happened, but the heat from the fires was completely gone. It took several seconds for me to remember I could even open my eyes anymore, but when I did look out again, I didn't see anything ablaze. The machines' lights had all died, though, which meant my phone was probably dead, if it hadn't melted in the heat.

Despite the vibrant pain radiating from my neck down to the back of my legs, I tried to feel around for my phone. It lay just behind the steel table, which still had heat percolating on its surface as it lay blackened on its side. By this point, my eyes had adjusted to the darkness just enough that I could make out computer monitors that had once probably been on the desk now laying in pieces on the floor all around where I had been curled up. It was a complete miracle none of the sharper pieces had found their way into me. A greater miracle, however, was seeing my phone entirely unharmed from the blast likely thanks to the table blocking it from the heat. Even the cord was just fine.

At first, my phone was on but not charging. The screen suggested it now had 10 percent battery life, and I swiftly turned it off. It felt like my phone was the only weapon and lifeline I had at that point, even though the internet was out, and I wanted it to stay alive for as long as

possible. I was just about to pull the charger out of the wall and venture outside when my phone beeped to say it was charging again.

The now-familiar humming sound filled the air again, too. I peered around the corner of what was left of the security office to see the machines had all started up again. A fleet of robots that looked like rabbits were jumping all over the place putting out any fires that had flared up again thanks to the fresh hit of air from the blasted-open roof, and robots that looked like centipedes were slamming their bodies at any overturned robots to push them up and put them back to work. For about 20 minutes I sat there while my phone charged, in paralyzed wonder to see how little damage a direct hit from a bomb had done to the factory. There were robots on the roof spraying at the gaping hole with some sort of plastic to close it up again.

If only this level of security had been given to every building in my town, I couldn't help but think.

After the initial shock of how incredible the factory was at surviving wore off, I took to sitting in the remains of the office, shivering uncontrollably thanks to the burn on my back laid bare against the cold air, wondering what I could do. I could try the hospital to help with my burns, but considering that even as I sat there, the ground shook from more bombs going off, it would probably be nothing but a waste of time.

While it was incredibly tempting to just stay where I was, I needed food and warmer, undamaged clothing. I would have to move. There had to be a way to survive all of this.

Still, my friend's text continued ringing in my head. How could the war have possibly reached those islands? Nothing made sense.

I formed a loose plan to search for clothing, anyone's clothing, and food, then return to the factory. If nothing else, it still had power to charge my phone. If my apartment building was still standing, maybe I could haul my microwave and a heater into the factory and set up a makeshift room in the bombed-out office room. If I could find a stable food supply, that would be all I would need to ride out the wave of destruction until the enemy got bored again.

With resolve guiding me through the gloom of the unknown, I left my phone charging and ventured through the factory toward the door I'd used to get in.

The door creaked open to reveal an inferno outside. The peaceful humming of the robots immediately made room for the screams of fear, of pain, of suffering from people trapped under collapsed buildings surrounding the factory. The moon shone down brightly enough through the billowing clouds of smoke, but the hundreds of fires still saw the need to help illuminate the devastation laid out before my eyes as I took a step back into the factory. It took several deep breaths before I could stagger out the door to take in what had once been my town.

There were no standing buildings beside the factory for miles. I saw a few people aimlessly wandering the streets, their skin dangling off of them like loose clothing, accompanied by random gunshots piercing through even the groans of metal twisting as buildings continued to collapse in on themselves. Gunshots, screams, abrupt silence, then more screams.

Ten steps out the door and I immediately went back inside, firmly pushing the door closed behind me.

There was no food, no water, no comfort from the impossible cold of the factory, but there was no path of survival beyond the walls that I could see either. To me, it seemed to be a choice of either being gunned down outside or starving to death surrounded by glowing robots still making ammunition. What trucks could possibly be left to come pick up the ammunition now anyway? What was even the point anymore? The robots just kept working away at crafting the bullets, coaxing together the drones that would drop the bombs, oblivious to how useless they were now. Soon, there wouldn't be anyone left to kill.

I dragged myself through the factory, fighting back tears, back to the office. A quick rummage through several overturned filing cabinets produced a thin blanket, at least, but nothing else that seemed remotely helpful. I briefly entertained the idea of setting fire to some

of the paperwork in the filing cabinets for warmth, but that might trigger the vacuum machine again. As painful as the burns were on my back, they were nothing compared to the feeling of having the air sucked out of my lungs like that.

The robots didn't even care my town had been leveled. The entire factory being soundproof, I couldn't hear the screams of people I'd probably passed on the streets when there'd still been peace. It was entirely selfish of me to hide in the factory like that, and part of me wanted to go back outside and look for survivors that I could have shelter with me, but to what end? They'd sit in the freezing factory and die of either starvation or hypothermia. Maybe it was better they were shot so it could be a faster. I hated the parts of my brain that reasoned away helping others, but I didn't want to invite anyone to hide with me if I had nothing else to offer them.

Surely, I thought, surely this factory is still connected to the internet.

How else could the factory signal to the trucks to come pick up the ammunition and weapons? I'd seen the massive doors in the back roll up like paper so robots could dump weapons from bins into trucks. That meant the factory had to be connected to some sort of server. If I could find it, I could communicate with my friend in New Zealand, at least.

It hurt beyond words, but I managed to haul my aching body up a set of stairs just next to the security office, then down a hallway that had a single door at the end of it. The ground shook as I'm sure another bomb hit pretty close to the factory, but I held onto the barren walls for support and managed to make it to that lone door. The door simply fell open when I pulled on the handle.

What I thought was the room that could house a server turned out to be the command center for the entire factory by the looks of it. There were screens turned on everywhere, all showing different parts of the factory as the robots continued their endless tasks. Some of the screens showed images from outside, and I couldn't help but take a step back from the screens and cover my mouth. It'd hurt my back too

much to scream, so instead, I bit my knuckles and tried to find a way to separate myself from what I was seeing.

People who were still alive were being dragged into the backs of trucks headed to God-knows-where, blood ran in the streets in little streams, too many bodies were still twitching on the sides of the road as the trucks rolled past. I didn't want to look too closely at anyone in case I recognized someone. I didn't want to know anyone.

The humming from the factory robots seemed to fill the air in the otherwise silent room as the cameras continued to faithfully record my town's destruction. The robots were feeding the war, cramming the ammunition down our throats so we could keep it going. To what end? If the war had spread to New Zealand, of all places, then there was no place left that didn't know war. So, what, then, was the war for anymore? What peace was being protected?

It was the robots; they were mindlessly ensuring humanity's destruction.

Right in front of me on a table housing too many buttons, a switch caught my eye:

Cargo Load Doors Manual Override

While I knew it was nothing but a token gesture since these kinds of factories were probably all over the world, I still felt a surge of satisfaction in flipping that switch and hearing a mechanical voice state, "Manual override activated. To shut the doors, please push the switch in a downward motion. To open the doors, please push the switch in an upward motion. Thank you."

I pushed down.

"Doors closing. Thank you," the voice said. "To lock the doors, please push the 'Lock doors' button beside the switch. Thank you."

A series of clicks wafted through the air after I pushed the button, followed by an alarm that lasted for a few seconds.

"Doors locked," the mechanical voice said. "Please be advised, the doors must open again within 24 hours or damage to our precious cargo will be inevitable."

"Good," I couldn't help but say aloud.

The machines would keep dumping the ammunition, weapons and drones into their respective bins until those filled. If any trucks came, though, their drivers wouldn't be able to get the doors open. With any luck, the factory would get so full of ammunition and everything else that the robots wouldn't be able to even function anymore. The stupid robots would drown in their own products. It was too much to hope for, but it still felt nice having hope in something again.

With a prick of pain in my chest, I wondered where I would be by then. Would I be alive long enough to see the robots "die" such a death, if it even worked? How long would it take for the factory to fill up?

My life would have to be reduced to one step at a time if I was going to keep surviving. I couldn't think about the robots' promising demise; I had to think about finding a way to lessen the cold. I had to think about finding the courage to venture out and find food and clothing, then return to the factory before I was found and either shot or dragged onto a truck.

One weary eye on the screens showing me the outside world as it burned, I vowed I would at least stay alive long enough to see the factory destroy itself.

**Sarah Hozumi writes, "I have been living and working around Tokyo for over 14 years. My dream is to have a book published and to have my photos displayed in a gallery one day." Visit <https://www.sarahhozumi.com/>
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BUG SPLATTER

ROSS BAXTER

When the reserves of oil and natural gas finally started to run out, most people feared the worst. However, the legions of pessimists and doom-mongers were proved wrong; instead of destroying society, the challenge of exhausted oilfields actually galvanised it. The predicted wars over dwindling resources never materialised, and instead international summits and treaties proliferated. For the first time in history the different nations and peoples actually came together, united by the common desire to

overcome the threat and move on.

The old world order quickly changed. As the fossil fuel reserves dwindled, alternative credible renewable technologies began to spring up. Global corporations declined and failed, to be quickly replaced by a new breed of entrepreneurs and business. Old fortunes were lost and new ones made as the world experienced a paradigm shift in economics and society, a phenomenon that very few had predicted. As the dust finally settled on exhausted non-renewable fuels it appeared to reveal a better place; a world with greatly reduced pollution, less political strife and more sustainable economies. Global warming reversed and oxygen levels started to increase. Prejudices built over numerous generations swiftly disintegrated, and many were even happy to accept the new breed of electric micro-vehicles which completely replaced the redundant but much loved automobile. Even with a top speed of just twenty miles per hour, the micro-vehicle quickly found its place in all societies across the world. To the surprise of almost everyone, the world succeeded in achieving a state that had been the dream of liberals and environmentalists in previous decades.

But then the insects came. The increase came slow at first, but as each year passed there seemed to be more and more. Initial annoyance soon developed into local misfortune, blossoming swiftly to national calamities, then to international catastrophes and finally to global crisis. Flying insects of every type and description filled the skies, seemingly everywhere. From massive swarms of tiny choking flies to plagues of huge ravenous locusts, there seemed to be no end, nor any escape. Crops were decimated, animals could no longer be kept in the barren fields, and people feared to step outdoors. Food supplies dwindled and global panic set in. As nations and societies started to crumble beneath dark clouds of six-legged pests, the best minds and institutions toiled ceaselessly to find what had tipped the ecological balance against mankind.

It took time to develop the models and the multi-layer hypothesis, but when the academics finally worked out the answer, it appeared almost too preposterous to believe. Insects clearly increased as the hu-

man population enlarged and created conditions favourable for them to exploit, but something had kept them in check for years. The theories all pointed to one conclusion; it was the gasoline powered vehicles that kept the insects at bay. The maths were simple: an old type automobile would splat on average around fifty-thousand insects a year against the windshield, hood and fender. When multiplied by over one and a half billion cars and trucks, that only equated to seventy-five thousand billion squashed bugs a year globally, but the amount had been just enough to keep the fly population below critical mass. Without the fast automobiles, the control no longer existed.

Mankind strived desperately to apply itself to the solution, but by the time the remaining scientists and engineers had developed a bug-splatteringly fast electric micro-car, it was too late.



After thirty years of naval service, Ross Baxter now concentrates on writing short stories. He has won a number of awards, and had a story included on the 2017 HWA Bram Stoker reading list. Married to a Norwegian and with two Anglo-Viking kids, he now lives in Derby, England.



MONSTERS:

OR, THINGS WE LEARN ABOUT
OURSELVES IN THE APOCALYPSE

HARRIET PHOENIX

A strain of guitar strings drifted through the trees and he followed it, along the path and out into the evening air.

She sat on a rock at the top of a small rise, acoustic guitar in her lap as she plucked out a tune just recognisable as ‘Country Roads, Take Me Home.’

"I took guitar in college," she called out to him. The auburn curls that had caught his eye before were tied back now, out of her round face. The hurricane lamp beside her threw strange shadows across her features. "Dropped it in Uni, though. I wasn't much good. But then I spotted this beauty on a scouting trip and there was room in the van, so I thought, never too late for an old hobby, is it? I mean, why not?"

He could think of several reasons why not, John Denver rolling in his grave being chief amongst them, but he drew closer. Behind her, the lights of her settlement were spread across the valley. He remembered her people, proudly telling him and Jackson about the solar panels they'd found in a warehouse. How they'd hauled them home and figured out how to set them up and get them working. How they'd got the lights back on. Even with those lights, though, these people didn't stay up late, not with crops to harvest. He only had an hour to kill before everyone would be properly asleep.

"You're Richards, right? Sorry, not always great with names."

He nodded. "And you're... Lynne?"

She nodded back, smiling. "That's right. Hey, Richards, help a girl out." Her foot nudged the guitar case at her feet. Perched on it was a hip flask. "If I drink all that, I'll be wrecked tomorrow. Save me from myself, would you?"

Now *there*, he could oblige. He took the flask with a murmur of thanks and sat with his back to another boulder to drink. To his surprise and pleasure, it was the good stuff, blue label. He supposed it was pretty cheap these days. In the olden days, that was called 'theft,' but law and order hadn't been a thing for two years. Funny, the things you learned about yourself in the apocalypse; turned out the lack of law enforcement suited him just fine.

"So, where's your friend?"

"Jackson? He turned in. he was pretty beat." In truth, he was annoyed at Jackson. He usually had his fun "making a distraction" while Jackson raided the food supplies. How was he supposed to do everything single-handed? Jackson had let him down, but good.

"I think Josie's a bit taken with him," Lynne said. "Be nice if you

guys stayed. There's a shortage of menfolk in these parts."

"Damn virus left twice as many women as men," he agreed, watching her. The way her skin caught the lamplight. A girl like her never would've looked twice at him in the old days, but in this brave new world, he was in demand.

There was still fun to be had. He'd finish the whiskey, and when he leaned in to put the empty flask back, he'd strike. One across the chops, then do John a favour and break the guitar over her head. She'd be dazed, on the grass. Helpless.

"That's because the immunity gene is on the X-chromosome, so women have twice the opportunity to inherit. I did GCSE science; I know whereof I speak." She smiled. "Actually, I heard it from a nurse. Government figured it out just a little too late to do anything."

"Uh huh?" He'd never heard this before.

"Mm-hmm. We sat down one time and worked out a chart for how that'll go, generation-wise. See, we figure that if an immune man and woman have a daughter, she's fine regardless. She's getting a good X-chromosome from her dad because that's the only one he's got, and maybe another one from her mum. But if they have a son, he's got a fifty-fifty chance of being okay because he'll only get the X-chromosome from his mother, who has a fifty-fifty chance of passing on her good one."

"Unless both her X-chromosomes are good," he said, pointing at her with the flask.

"That'd be great, but what are the chances?" She shifted on her rock, and her fingers missed a note. "The gene's so rare, expecting someone to have inherited two is like asking lightning to strike twice."

"Virus is gone, ain't it?" This was odd, for him. Usually he threw a Molotov or two at the town library, or whatever building seemed the most flammable, and then grabbed some girl in the confusion as people ran around panicking. Drag her into the shadows, shove her down. A foot in the stomach and what came next was all his own way.

But this... making idle chitchat with his oblivious prey as he anticipated the fun he'd have, was a whole other kind of power. And it

wouldn't be some rushed struggling skirmish in the dark. He could take his time. *Savour.*

"Let's hope so." Lynn switched to 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,' sullyng another John's memory. "Otherwise, after everything we've been through, our generation will lose half our sons. A quarter of our children, lost to this virus too. But, let's talk about something more cheerful. What did you do? You know, before?"

"Before? Oh, I ran a website." He took a slug of whiskey. "Philosophy."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. All about where society was headed, where it all went wrong, how to keep it from going totally down the toilet. Like that. Not much of a readership - not everyone liked the harsh truths I was laying down - but I was building up a core fanbase. A brave handful of free thinkers."

"I was a student." *Ah, of course. She asked about me, but really she wanted to talk about herself.* "History. I sort of lacked direction, you know, didn't really know what to do with my life, but I had to pick something, and I always liked the Ancient Greeks, so..."

She shrugged. "I had a job waitressing too. Café near my student flat. So one day we're clearing up after the lunchtime rush, but I guess Ellen forgot to lock the door because suddenly this guy barges in. Paul - that's my boss - yells, 'We're closed!' But this guy just stands there, and when I look up from the table I'm wiping down, I notice he doesn't look... right."

She quirked an eyebrow. "You remember how they got, when the virus hit the brain? They'd go sort of blank, but in this weirdly intense way. And then they'd seek out people, like that fungus that makes ants climb trees to spread its spores. But I just thought he was on drugs."

"So he's standing there looking at us, and we're standing there looking at him, and Paul says, 'I said we're closed!' and the guy just *runs* at him. Full-on slams into Paul and sends him flying into the counter, piles right in on top and starts battering him with his fists. Ellen starts screaming, and the guy jumps up and rounds on her. She

tries to dodge, but she's cornered and he slams her into a wall.

"Something about that makes me unfreeze. I bump the table so he hears me and then I run off into the back where there's a mop cupboard. I've just got the door open when the guy rushes me, but somehow, I manage to trip him just right and slam the door. Ellen comes up and locks it while I brace against him bodyslamming from the inside. Meanwhile Paul's calling the police and an ambulance, but that's not who comes. It's the army."

"Oh, yeah?" He sips more whiskey. It was just over half full when he started, and he'd had half of that. He'd bind her wrists with the guitar strings, he decided, and since the strings would still be attached to the neck of the guitar he'd use it like a stake, drive it into the ground over her head. Then he'd take out his knife and cut off her clothes.

"Yeah. Men in hazmat suits bundled us into a jeep, me and Ellen and Paul and a couple of others I guess the guy ran into outside, and they drove us to a base where we stayed in isolation rooms in a block with an airlock door. I guess 'isolated' was in relation to the rest of the world, because we could hear each other just fine. That was good at first, because we could talk, but then I had to listen as they got sick."

Her fingers faltered again on the strings. "Well, you know how it went, right? First it was flu that got worse and worse and then suddenly better, then they got... edgy. Then manic. By the end they were strapped to their beds, moaning and screaming, nothing that made sense. And then, they fell silent.

"And all the while, my temperature never twitched. Not one degree."

"What did you do?" He was interested now, despite himself. Sure, this was probably all bull, but it was interesting bull.

"What *could* I do? Chatted with the doctors and nurses who brought me food and took my temperature and my blood and tissue samples. Built a rapport, you know, learned as much as I could. And of course, those doctors and nurses were coming down with it too, because it was outside as well as in. I sort of sensed trouble. When they asked me how I was feeling and stuff, they didn't seem as interested in

the answers, like it didn't matter so much. Which meant *I* didn't matter so much."

"But they let you go, surely?"

"Not exactly. See, military people follow orders. In this case, orders from some guy in a suit somewhere who said, 'Tie off the loose ends,' meaning me."

Her fingers stilled for a moment, then started again on a new tune, some melancholy thing that might have been by Aerosmith.

"There was this guy, this soldier. Came into my room a couple of times. He spoke to me, exchanged the time of day, but that felt like a pretext. They weren't even bothering with hazmat by then, and he looked at me like... well, like someone casing a bank to rob. The first time he did that, I tried to look bored and oblivious. Harmless, you know. And when he was gone, I started unscrewing a strut from my bed."

"But he came back?"

"Yeah, a couple of times. I guess, when the time came, he wanted me complacent. But coming in with a handgun sort of gave the game away." Her gaze played over her fingers, pressing down the strings. "He looked feverish, the groggy stage, which probably helped. No way I could've beaten a healthy soldier. He told me to stand and face the wall, and I said hell no. So he took a step closer and said it again, and I stood and faced him and said if he was going to shoot me he'd have to come over and look right in my eyes and do it."

"And did he?" The girl was a crappy guitar player, but she spun a good story. He didn't for a second buy that this slight woman with red ringlets and a pert nose could take on a soldier, but he slowed his drinking anyway.

"Well, he came over. Held the gun right to my chest, and I looked right in his eyes and said, 'Is your mother proud of you?' He blinked, and that's when I hit him with the strut."

She looked at him. "Like I said, never would've worked if he'd been healthy. But he was just slow enough that I managed to crack him under the gun arm, knock his hand away. And then I kept swing-

ing, because when you get someone on the ropes who's trying to kill you, you don't let them recover. I got him in the head, the chest, and I kept swinging for his gun arm. I wanted to *cripple* him, you see, and that was my mistake.

"Went for the cripple. Should've gone for the kill."

That was funny, her talking about killing as if she could do it. He imagined how she'd stumble into town next morning, naked and bleeding. People would be dealing with the fires he'd set, people who'd see her and know. They'd never forget and neither would she, any time she saw her reflection, because the last thing he'd do before he was done with her would be to slash his knife across her face, the way he always did. One across the forehead, angled through her right eyebrow. One between her eyes, across the bridge of her nose and off to the left. Finally, to the right again through her lips. Neither she nor anyone who saw her would ever forget whose girl she was.

"When I thought he was out, I grabbed his gun and a knife I saw on his belt, a big one with a black blade with one smooth edge and one saw edge. Then I saw he had a keycard, so I took that to get through the airlock and I ran.

"The problem was, it had been a couple of weeks since I was brought there, and it wasn't a big place, but there were a lot of isolation rooms all packed in together, and I kept running into dead ends. That was his advantage over me, I guess. He knew the way, and I didn't."

"He caught up to you?"

She nodded. "He was a soldier, with orders to carry out. Or maybe he was in the manic phase by then, and I was the closest person. But you know the stupid thing? I'd been seeing people come into my room and leave again the whole time, but somehow it had got lodged in my brain that the door closed automatically. It didn't. I'd just spotted the airlock and started running towards it when he came out of *nowhere* and slammed me to the ground.

"He had me pinned to the floor, this soldier twice my size. I was winded and he was scrabbling for the gun, which I had in a death grip but he'd got my wrist and was bending it to breaking point, and I knew

in a second I'd drop it and then it'd all be over.

"Then I remembered I had a knife. It was in my left hand, which was pinned under his body and going numb, but I sort of twisted against him just enough to get my arm around and jabbed the knife into his side. And then I jabbed and jabbed and kept jabbing, because somewhere it had registered with me that my only chance against this guy was to hit him as early and as hard and as often as I possibly could. I kept jabbing even when he stopped twisting my wrist. When he stopped moving."

"I only stopped when I saw it in his eyes. I was looking right into them as he died."

Silence spiralled between them, silence that the wavering notes of 'Dream On' somehow didn't touch.

"So," she said. "I picked myself up out of this spreading pool of blood and I let myself out. There was a guard desk, but no one on duty, I guess because there weren't enough people left. There weren't a whole lot of people outside, either, but I waited a couple of hours until dark before I found the storage building. I was just wearing bloodstained hospital scrubs, so I helped myself to a change of clothes, then filled a pack with food and other stuff I thought I'd need for a cross-country trek. And then I just walked out the gate."

"Just like that? No one tried to stop you?"

"There weren't so many people left. But yeah, a couple of people tried. Not sure if they were manic, or just arranging deck chairs on the Titanic, but there was one lady tried to grab me in the storage building and another guy who tried to stop me leaving the base. Anyway, suffice it to say I got out, and found myself in a world that had basically ended. I ditched the fatigues in the first clothing store I could find, because I wasn't feeling altogether well-disposed towards the military just then. First I went home, but half the town had burned down and my folks were nowhere to be found, so I kept moving. Eventually I ran into Josie and we travelled together until we ran into this place."

"No, sorry," he said. He'd finished the whiskey, and a warm, peaceful feeling had spread through his chest. "Go back a bit. You say

they tried to stop you leaving? How did you *stop* them stopping you?"

She smiled. "In due time. First, though, could I ask you something?"

"Sure."

She stopped playing, leaning her crossed arms on the guitar. "Where is Jackson, really?"

"Told you. He turned in. He's pretty beat." This time, he couldn't resist chuckling at his own joke.

"Is that because he didn't want to leave?"

He blinked at her, but she smiled.

"To answer your question... well, there's a couple of things you need to understand about that. Contextual things."

"What?"

"Well. First of all, there's a small detail I left out. Remember how I told you I was looking into that guy's eyes as he died?"

"Yes..."

"Well, the detail I left out of that is that *I liked it*." Her smile didn't waver. "When the lights went out behind his eyes and I knew he was dead, that I'd beaten him, that he'd come to kill me but I'd killed him? It made me happy.

"Things you learn about yourself in the apocalypse, right?"

"At first, I told myself I was just happy to be alive. Those hours, staying out of sight before I went for supplies? The whole time, I was going over and over that moment and trying to convince myself it was just euphoria at getting to survive. It wasn't that I liked killing, that wasn't *me*. But then someone else posed a threat, and someone else. Another person attacked me when I reached a town. I wasn't threatening them or anything, they just went for me. That's another reason I wanted to get out of the fatigues; they had blood on them. So by then, I had to admit the truth; I'm a killer.

Her gaze hadn't moved from his. He giggled nervously.

"A killer? You? But you're all..." He waved a hand at her slender form.

"Oh, I don't roam the country attacking people or anything, I'm

not a maniac. There has to be a *reason* for it, you know. They've got to *deserve* it.

"Which leads me to the other thing."

She reached down and opened her guitar case. The interior was obscured by shadows, and then the guitar was in the way as she eased it inside. But once it was out of the way, he saw a small modification she'd made to the lid's lining.

The red velvet had been cut and resewn to make a pocket. And from that pocket, stuck the moulded grip of an Army knife.

His blood froze, the cheerful warmth of the whiskey gone instantly. And yet, he couldn't move. His limbs wouldn't obey him.

"I forgot to ask, by the way," she said. Her finger reached out to stroke the knife handle. "Did you enjoy the whiskey?"

His eyes were locked open, wide and staring as she slowly drew the knife out of its sheath. The blade was black with a saw on one side, exactly as she'd described.

"I really hope you did," she said. "Never say I short-shifted you, Richards; I gave you the good stuff. I wanted to cover the taste of the paralytic. And I'll make this quick, which is more consideration than I think you planned to extend to me."

He croaked. Swallowed, cleared his throat, tried again.

"Lynn," he gasped. "Please... I never... I wasn't..."

"Oh, wait!" She slapped the side of her head with her free hand. "Silly me! If forgot to say what the other thing was, didn't I?"

She stood and absently brushed down her skirt. "See, the other thing is that, while the internet is obviously a thing of the past, we still have social media of a sort. There's trade between the settlements, messengers going back and forth... a few have even dusted off some ham radios and kept in touch that way. And we've had reports through that grapevine, reports about a couple of guys who come to settlements claiming to be from another place nearby, looking to establish relations. A couple of guys matching your description, and Jackson's.

"These guys are pretty friendly, it seems. They chat with people,

eat their food, drink their cider. And then, once everyone's gone to bed, a building gets burned. Usually the library. And while everyone's running around putting out the fire, their food stores get robbed. But that's not the worst of it, oh no. because one of the guys - the one matching *your* description as it goes - grabs some poor girl in all the confusion, and assaults her. Likes to cut off all her clothes, and once he's done, he slashes her face too. Always the same pattern, three slashes in a Z like he thinks he's Zorro. Except Zorro, if I remember correctly, probably would have killed this asshole."

She glanced around theatrically. "Guess Zorro's not here. Oh, well."

She stepped around the guitar case. But she didn't come close enough for him to consider making a lunge, drugged as he was. she wouldn't make that mistake, because a soldier had taught her that *down* was not the same as *out*.

"I have a question," she said. "Jackson does the stealing, right? And he must know about the burning. But does he know about the rest of it, what you do to the girls?"

He stared back at her, not answering. Not giving her the satisfaction.

"Never mind, then. We'll find out after we find him, I guess. He's tied up somewhere, right? Because he wanted to stay here. He's been getting sick of this raider lifestyle and wants to settle down and build something, but you're not ready to give up on the wannabe Viking routine just yet. So you beat him up and stashed him somewhere so he couldn't warn anyone."

He found his voice then, forcing the words out through lips that didn't want to move. "Jackson... weak. Tired. Wanted... boring domestic life... why?"

She looked down at him. Shaking her head, she knelt across his chest, pinning him to the earth, knees on his arms, and held the point of the knife above the frantic pounding of his heart.

"That girl six months ago?" she said. "She was fifteen. And before that, at the village by a beach? She got pregnant. But don't picture her

saddled with your baby, because she gave him away to a nice couple in another town. When you leave this world, take this picture with you; your son is being raised by a pair of lesbians, up North.”

With that, she leaned forward, her weight on the knife.
And looked into his eyes.

Harriet Phoenix is a longtime nerd, who's wanted to be a writer since she was old enough to understand that books are written by people. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous odd little places, including The Screw Turn Flash Fiction Competition, the Riptide journal, Swindon Writing and the recent fantasy anthology Never Cheat a Witch. Find her at harrietphoenix.com.



WILD BLUE YONDER

DON MONEY

“Outlaw Gold to Argus Control.”

Captain Scott Karson vectored his F-22 Raptor on an attack approach as he communicated with the Joint Stars command aircraft loitering over the Kansas battlefield.

“Argus Control copies you Outlaw Gold. Set your approach pattern for a north to south run. Your target is a big one, a Titan-class monster. The bastard just wiped out Kansas City.”

The end of the world began a week ago with hundreds of bellowing roars as the surge of monsters erupted from the earth

and rose out of the oceans. Nothing could stand against the wave of destruction the monsters released. The hundred feet tall armored behemoths trampled everything and everyone beneath them. What they didn't flatten, they ripped apart, or burned with blue-hot jets of fire from their mouths.

The F-22, in all its lethality, closed in range with the monster. Fighter jets and bombers seemed to be the only thing tempering the speed of the apocalypse that was erupting all over the planet. "Roger that, Argus Control. Coming in weapons hot with JDAMs. I've got the monster locked in my sights."

Flying at Mach 1 and twelve miles out the Raptor released the two 1,000 pound Joint Direct Attack Munitions on a collision course with the new apex predator of Earth. Captain Karson pushed his jet on to finish the Titan off should the bombs injure but not kill.

The Joint Stars aircraft with its satellite feed received the first view of the attack's aftermath. "Outlaw Gold, we see a good hit, Titan is down but there is still movement. Recommend an insurance shot."

"Copy that, Argus Control, closing in with AIM-120 missiles for a kill shot."

Karson could see the giant writhing on the ground, one leg completely blown off and the upper torso severely damaged. The captain activated the laser sighting and targeted the monster bracketing it with two missiles, both striking the Titan in the head.

In minutes, the death throes were over. The Raptor made a final victory pass over the dead beast. "The ground crew needs to paint another monster victory mark on the plane. Looks like we can chalk another win for air power."

Captain Karson's reverie was broken by the frantic call from the communications officer on the Joint Stars. "Outlaw Gold, Outlaw Gold, you have an incoming bogey on radar 30 miles north and closing fast. The radar signature does not match any known aerial profile."

The Raptor climbed in altitude and banked right to meet the new threat head on. With two missiles left and its Vulcan cannon Captain

Karson still had enough teeth to knock anything out of the sky.

The speck in the distance grew as the two foes closed in. Captain Karson struggled to rationalize what he was seeing, a nightmare come to life, the monsters were not limited to the ground anymore.

With a wing span of forty feet, the gray scaly monster twisted its body extending talons outward to slash through the metal fuselage of the aircraft. The Raptor pilot's combat reflexes kicked in and he sent the plane in a barrel roll away from certain death.

A bank to the right and the fighter jet had the sky monster lined up and let loose a burst from the Vulcan cannon. The aerial behemoth deftly rolled below the shots that stitched harmlessly over its head.

"Dammit," Captain Karson swore as he climbed fast and high away from the unseen enemy.

As the F-22 leveled out the flying monster was heading straight for the plane. Karson triggered the last two missiles and watched as the monster rose above them. As quickly as the airman's hope of a win rose, it died with him as the talons rippled through the cockpit.

With the new sky monsters introduction to the world and the war, the acceleration of the apocalypse was at hand. The wild blue yonder was no longer a refuge and the planet would soon belong to the monsters.



Don Money writes stories across a variety of genres. He is a middle school literacy teacher. His short stories have been published in multiple anthologies including with Trembling With Fear, Shacklebound Books, Black Hare Press, and in Troopers, Martian, Stupefying Stories, and Stygian Lepus magazines. Don can be found on Twitter @donmoneywriting



THE ROT

NELLY SHULMAN

This winter, the City stopped cleaning the streets, where the shadows wrapped in scarves swarmed among the snowdrifts. A massive granite column in the middle of the square rose into the empty sky, devoid of birds who had disappeared with the arrival of the Rot.

The Teacher heard that flocks of seagulls and pigeons live in the abandoned palaces on the southern edge of the City, but she did not believe these stories.

Her handcart scraped the frozen granite slabs of the square. Having passed the peeling wall of the former art museum, making her way between the snow hummocks, she headed towards a large hole from where the City folk fetched water. A bucket tied to a cart rattled over potholes in the river ice.

She had to reach the island, where columns topped with torches rose. Their oxblood color had peeled off, replaced by the dirty pink of washed clothes.

Born after the advent of the Rot, she had never met anyone over forty. People did not survive this mark, although some insisted they were in their fifties, but nobody trusted them because the Rot caused false memories.

As the Teacher skidded across the ice, she tried to remember how old her mother was.

“Almost forty,” she realized.

She still had fifteen years to go. Having passed the crowd of people at the ice hole, the Teacher dragged the cart further.

No one knew where the Rot came from, affecting not only people but also stone and metal, first attacking the new things.

The outskirts have turned into deserts, and in a City that once numbered five million people, there were barely fifty thousand left.

The Rot was contagious. Anyone born in the City was a carrier, and anything from the City contained deadly spores. Her mother said that thirty years ago, people tried to escape, but the government closed the borders and shot refugees.

She asked her mother if the Mainland had ever helped them. The woman looked at her with empty eye sockets. Before death, Rot sucked the eyes out, turning them into balls of gray threads. The mother moved her wrinkled lips.

“Why would they do so? The Mainland hates us and wants us to wither and die.”

The mother was still muttering something, but the Teacher was not listening. After the eyes, Rot went to the brain. The last to give up was the body, transformed by disease into a shaggy cocoon, like a cobweb hanging in the corners of abandoned apartments.

When the time came, she wrapped the light cocoon in torn sheets and left it in the yard, where her mother quickly became dust. Those dying in winter froze into ice build-ups on the streets, waiting for the thaw.

The Teacher walked past two former museums and the site where a bronze statue of a scientist used to stand. The relatively new monument quickly rotted.

She did not know who the scientist was. At first, the City tried to maintain a semblance of normality and kept schools open, but soon everyone gave up on education.

Her mother taught the Teacher several languages. The old books were still in order, but the Teacher heard that Rot had recently begun devouring century-old volumes. Fortunately, the City's antique publications could provide reading for several generations.

The Teacher knew about cars and computers, telephones and airplanes, but the City had lost almost all technology. They could use old electrical networks, but there was no fuel. The Teacher read that during the Great Siege, the Mainland sent them fuel and provisions.

Walking to the entrance to the former university, she remembered that during the Siege, people ate animals and each other. There have not been any animals around for a long time.

"They all ran away," her mother told the Teacher, "or the Mainland soldiers shot them like they shot people."

Rot did not touch the provisions. The City's stores and warehouses were full of supplies, but they voluntarily introduced food rationing cards in memory of those who starved to death in the Great Siege. The Teacher did not know who ticked the metronome in the streets, who rang the city clock, and who every day fired the cannon in the fortress.

A dark shadow flashed behind the broken windows of the university entrance. The Rot had overcome hunger but could not yet overcome desire.

Dragging a handcart behind her, the Teacher squeezed inside, where a broken clock hung in the cluttered lobby. Bent hands froze on the corroded enamel dial. The arrows stopped sometime after

lunch. The Teacher did not keep track of the hours and minutes. At noon, they heard a cannon shot from the fortress, but otherwise, an impenetrable veil covering the City obscured the time.

The sky, frosty or stormy, always remained gray, and the trees stood bare all year round. Some blamed the Rot for the changed weather, while others said the Mainland was trying to poison the City with river water.

The Teacher followed the dark shadow up the dirty marble of the once majestic staircase. It occurred to her that the Professor, whose father was a biologist, might know something about it. The Rot generation, having no occupations or professions, called themselves by what their parents did.

For some reason, the Professor always locked his office, resembling a dark cave with the skeletons of dead plants sticking out of the corners, but the Teacher never closed her apartment doors because all the thieves had disappeared long ago.

They entered a side closet with a squashed sofa. Outside, a blizzard embroidered the streets with white lace. The Rot relieved them of the feeling of cold. In winter, people wore coats, but the Teacher suspected they were only following a habit.

Summer no longer existed, and the City dragged itself from winter into damp and dirty semi-spring. After the rains, frosts would return, and everything happened again.

The Teacher thought it was the end of January. No one remembered the calendar or cared about dates or days of the week. She knew her date of birth from her mother. Twenty-five years ago, some hospitals were still open, but the Teacher assumed that children are born at home. There was a talk of the Rot causing infertility, but her periods had always been regular.

She measured times in an old notebook kept in her desk drawer, but over the past three months, the Teacher has not drawn a single line. Afraid of making a mistake, she decided to remain silent for now.

“Do you think anyone has been here?” the Teacher pointed to an old map on the table.

Her finger moved towards the huge Lake that lay outside the City.

The Professor was not surprised by her question.

“Yes, of course. For example, me.”

The Teacher pulled herself away from his warm embrace.

“Tell me,” she curled up on the sofa. “I hope this is not another of your father’s stories?”

The Professor told her about birds and animals, trees and mosses, fish and dragonflies. The Teacher always liked this word. Once, she asked whether the Professor has ever seen them or dragons and he laughed.

“Dragons never existed. People came up with them based on fossil pterodactyls.”

The Professor, however, remembered the dragonflies. He showed the Teacher an old collection of insects kept in the former natural history museum. Emerald and sapphire wings shimmered in the uncertain light of a stormy day.

“They flew,” said the Professor dreamily. “They flew in parks and over lakes.”

The Teacher held her breath, not wanting to disturb the dragonflies pinned to the rustling sheets of yellowing paper. She yearned to see them fly but understood that this would never happen.

Dragonflies flew on the Mainland, but none of those who went there returned to the City. Just like thirty years ago, the border remained locked because the inhabitants of the Mainland feared the Rot.

The Professor pointed to the map.

“Walking east, I got to the railway bridge.”

The Teacher saw pictures of old coal-powered steam locomotives. The Rot devoured photographs, except for the most ancient ones, but her mother told her about modern trains and airplanes. The City’s metro tunnels had collapsed long ago.

“Isn’t it destroyed?” the Teacher asked with unexpected excitement.

The Professor was surprised to notice a spark of interest in her usually calm eyes, which lit up only once when he showed her a collection of insects. Even in bed, the Teacher never looked at him.

Once, the Professor asked why she was doing this.

“So as not to see the mold,” she answered.

A grayish tint first appeared in the corners of the eyes, gradually dissolving them. The Professor realized that the Teacher was preparing for his imminent death.

Those born in the City could resist the Rot for years, slowly turning into cocoons of dry threads. He lied to the Teacher about his age, knowing that a City woman would not want a relationship with an almost corpse.

He remembered the warm rains and dragonflies of his childhood, the white sand of the bay, the trees and birds of the City, the beach tram swinging on rails, and the taste of ice cream.

In the gray darkness of twilight, her face breathed youth. The Professor was not going to lie to her.

“The Rot spared the bridge, but I didn’t see any trains,” he answered.

She twirled a reddish curl around her finger. “You saw something else.”

The Professor admired her sharp mind, even though she lacked formal education. The Teacher learned several languages but knew almost nothing about the long-defunct school curriculum.

“I saw people,” he finally said. “Surviving people.”

* * *

On the way to the southern bank of the river, they went to the ice hole, and the Professor pulled out the bucket himself. The Teacher settled down next to the cart, stuffing her gloved hands into the pockets of a red coat. The Rot did not affect the fabric or her old-fashioned, pointed boots, unsuitable for walking on ice and snow.

To go east, they had to find warm clothes. The Professor assumed they could use furs untouched by the Rot.

The Teacher lived in his favorite area, among a triangle of canals, next to the peeling turquoise walls of the former opera house. The Professor was surprised by her invitation. During the six months of their meetings, she always came to his residence, as the Professor mockingly

called his late father's office, where he grew up.

The Professor screwed the frozen bucket to the rusty slats. Rust was a good sign because it overcame the Rot.

"I have coffee," said the Teacher. "I thought that you would appreciate some."

Having climbed the icy steps leading from the river, the Teacher turned to him.

"I believe you," she said. "You have always been honest with me."

The Professor decided not to admit anything more for now.

Crossing the deserted, windy square, passing the pockmarked, decaying dome of the cathedral, the Professor glanced at his companion. The Teacher walked forward with concentration, raising her stubborn chin. The expression on her face seemed familiar, but the Professor shook his head.

"Nonsense, I'm imagining everything. I didn't get a good look at the man."

He traveled to the upper reaches of the River on foot during the only dry fortnight of the year when the ground froze before the arrival of winter. It took him a week to reach a railway bridge untouched by the Rot. Beyond it lay a huge Lake, which, according to rumors, was guarded by the military, but the Professor did not see any patrols or inhabitants of the Mainland.

He followed the Teacher to the second floor of her cold house, where the Deco mosaics and stains of the Rot decorated the front porch.

Diving into the ajar door, the Teacher turned around.

"The building is two hundred years old," she explained. "I'm safe here for now. This is my parents' apartment."

Broken furniture littered the spacious kitchen. While the Teacher lit the stove, the Professor emptied the bucket into a large tank in the corner. The elegant bell tower rose behind the dusty kitchen window. The faded cornflower blue paint of the church walls went towards the eternally stormy sky.

"The best view in the city," the Professor said. "I've always liked

this area.”

The aroma of slightly burnt coffee and the familiar smell of tobacco enveloped the kitchen. Settling down on the windowsill, the Teacher handed him a rolled-up cigarette.

“Tell me what you saw.”

The Professor saw very little. Hiding in the trees on the hilly side of the river, he surveyed the settlement. The inhabitants, whoever they were, did not lack weapons. Mortars stuck out above a high iron wall, and boats were moored at a makeshift pier. Smoke rose into the clear sky.

Armed guys who approached the closed gates of the settlement dragged the corpses of dead deer. The tallest man with red graying hair reminded him of the Teacher.

The Professor drank the last drops of coffee. The Rot did not affect the porcelain and earthenware, but judging by the cups, the Teacher preferred antique ones. The Professor realized he had never heard about the Teacher’s father.

He said, “There are real trees with leaves growing there, and in the forest, I heard birds and saw animals.”

The Teacher opened her mouth like a child.

“Tell me you saw dragonflies,” she demanded.

The Professor smiled.

“They don’t fly in the autumn.”

He touched her bony shoulder under the dress of antique silk.

“You never talked about what happened to your father.”

Her eyes became clouded as if affected by mold.

“He left and didn’t return,” the Teacher replied. “I don’t remember him.”

The Professor has always been famous for his persistence.

“Was he born in the City?”

The shadow of a smile touched her pale lips.

“Why would he run then?” The Teacher threw the coffee grounds into an old bucket. “We last longer than strangers.”

The Professor straightened up.

“I only have a year to live,” he looked into her cleared eyes. “I

wanted you to know.”

He hesitated.

“I’m going back to the settlement. Maybe we can do something.”

Without answering, she walked into the dark corridor.

That night the Teacher dreamed of dragonflies. Golden creatures with transparent wings fluttered over the green river, where a school of fish slid like a silver ribbon over the white sand on the bottom.

The Teacher had only seen the sun a few times in her life, during a short couple of weeks in the pre-winter period when the wind blew away the clouds to reveal the faint blue of the sky. She did not open her eyes, thinking about dragonflies and the rainbow stretching over the river like a magic bridge.

Her mother told her about the colors of this miracle, seen after the brief summer rain over the city fortress.

Remembering the midday cannon shot, the Teacher whispered, “Professor, you know everything.”

He smiled, and the Teacher kissed him right on that light smile.

“You know everything,” she repeated. “Who fires the cannon?”

He sighed.

“The children of museum workers who lived in the fortress. They know how to do it and will teach their children to shoot.”

“If their children will be born,” the Teacher thought.

As a child, she read a book about a man who survived on a desert island by marking the time on the wooden planks. Her lines took up only a few pages in a yellowed archival notebook.

She lay there, barely breathing.

“I have to tell him everything,” the Teacher decided. “He said how old he is.”

“If you were nine years old when the Rot began, you should have gone to school, at least a little,” she said, and the Professor nodded.

“For two years. My school was on an island near the university, although we lived closer to the bay on the waterfront.”

The bay has become dangerous, and people who went west did not return to the City.

“You can’t get away from here across the sea, and the Creatures

live on the large island,” the Teacher said.

The large island at the end of the bay was once a naval base. It was rumored in the City that people who had gone there for provisions ended the bloody remains on the sea ice.

“I don’t know anything about the Creatures,” the Professor replied, “but I think in the east there is a better chance of escape.”

They fell silent. People in the City sometimes talked of escaping, but it was an idle chatter. First, you had to survive, and then the Rot came.

“We are a sacrifice,” the Teacher remembered her mother’s words.

She heard her weak, breathless voice.

“Some were selfish and saved themselves without thinking about their loved ones.”

The Teacher sensed a hidden resentment in her mother’s words.

“They fled, leaving families behind,” her mother mumbled. “They didn’t love anyone but themselves.”

The bed was the warmest place in the huge bedroom with its marble fireplace, where the wood glowed orange. The Teacher sat down, holding the blanket over her shoulders.

She wasn’t cold, but she liked the soft material. The wallpaper in the room disappeared, revealing ancient crumbling plaster.

The Professor said, “This City has long been prophesied to turn into a desolate wilderness. It seems that the prediction will come true, but I don’t want to witness our decline.”

He looked into the darkness outside the window.

“However, I won’t see it, considering the days of my life are few.”

The Teacher wanted to say that the Professor would have time to see their child, but she decided to be silent.

“The mold will eat his eyes,” the Teacher sighed. “He will lose his mind and turn into a gray cocoon. I will wrap his remains in a sheet and take them out into the yard, just like I did with my mother. The baby will never know his father, and he will grow up an orphan.”

The Professor coughed.

“With all said and done, I’m thinking about another ascent along

the river because I have nothing to lose. Except you, of course.”

The fragile gold of the dragonflies shone above the water, and their transparent wings glowed in the sun. It was too early, but the Teacher still listened to her heartbeat.

“He already has a heart,” the woman remembered. “Or she. Maybe they’ll see the dragonflies.”

She returned to his warm embrace.

“I will go with you.”

* * *

The rotten grate rattled, and an emaciated woman, wrapped in a scarf, turned over the pock-marked enamel sign. Only a few letters were visible on the reverse side.

“Lose,” the voice rang out, “Mister, what is lose?”

The girl looked about five years old. The Professor had not met such young children for a long time, but the girl could have been more mature. The City folk looked very young until they began to rot from the inside.

The manager of the district warehouse put a list printed on yellowed paper on an antique table. The old typewriters still worked.

“Then we’ll have to write by hand,” the Professor realized. “Until we lose the paper.”

The Professor noticed a familiar silvery shine in the colorless eyes of the manager. Some lived with the Rot for years. The Professor’s eyes have not yet lost the bright blue of his childhood.

A small line moved forward, and the girl unceremoniously tugged at his arm.

“Mister, what is lose?”

He replied, “Closed. Some letters were lost.”

The girl responded knowledgeably, “They rotted.”

The Professor was bothered by the persistent gaze of a bald man in a gray coat at the end of the line. The norms for issuing weekly rations remained the same.

“Flour - 4 pounds, fats - 1 pound, groceries - 1 pound, milk powder - 1 pound.”

Groceries included pasta, cereals, sugar, tea, and rare coffee. They received one pack of cigarettes a month, but non-smokers sold the rations on the black market.

Many in the City insisted that the Rot was sent to them by the Mainland, but the Professor did not believe that the Mainland hated the City so much. According to the old maps, there had been a border north of the City, but the Professor had no idea what country lay beyond it. At school, they were told that the Mainland occupied everything around the City.

The girl said, "Thirty-five-twelve."

Every resident of the City had a code. During the early years of the Rot, people fled from the collapsing new buildings, forgetting their names. District Committees for the State of Emergency, which officially still existed, coded everyone.

Committees supervised the distribution of food, the so-called street cleaning, the sound of the metronome, and the midday firing of a cannon in the fortress. The sounds of the metronome were transmitted through the old wires.

The new pipes turned to dust. The City carried water from the river and emptied buckets of sewage into the canals.

In the barred window of the warehouse, one could see a black hole on the dirty gray ice. Bare branches of bushes protruded from the red brick of the arch leading to the ancient shipyard.

"You have three on the list," the manager said. "Two adult rations and one child."

"That's right," the girl responded. "Father, mother, and me."

The manager pursed her lips.

"Why didn't your parents come?"

The Professor noticed that the girl shuddered.

"They're busy," she said. "Give me some rations, Miss. There's a queue waiting."

The manager muttered something under her breath and the man in a gray coat stepped forward.

"That's right," he confirmed. "I'm their neighbor."

The girl pulled the glass jars of a faded cloth string bag.

“How will you carry everything?” the manager asked. “The streets are slippery.”

A man in a gray coat took the string bag from the girl.

“I’ll help her. Don’t worry.”

The Professor frowned. The man didn’t say he would return and didn’t ask to save his place in line.

Remembering how the girl shuddered, the Professor thought she must have lost her parents to the Rot.

He touched the shoulder of the woman in front, wearing a padded jacket covered with old oil stains. The man and the girl would not have walked far on the ice ridges on the street.

The woman turned, groping in the air with her bony hand. Her eyes were almost overgrown with the Rot, leaving only gaps in the interweaving of gray threads.

The Professor always felt awkward meeting the dying people, whose blindness and madness did not prevent them from roaming the streets, croaking something unintelligible, trying to find their way home. Many crawled into the open front doors, huddling in the corners and growing into fluffy cocoons. The winds drove their dust into the streets.

The woman in front of him had very little time left ahead.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, and the woman mumbled something.

An icy whirlwind and snow pellets slapped his face in the courtyard of a crumbling house, where the windows turned black like gnawed holes. District Committees left the warning signs in bright carmine, but the paint did not resist the Rot well, and the letters almost disappeared from the corroded walls.

Slipping on the snow, the Professor looked around. He understood why the strange man pretended to be the girl’s neighbor. The orphan needed food and would have done anything to survive because it was impossible to live on children’s rations.

The Professor hurried behind the large and small shadows. The reflection of a burning torch flickered in the twilight. The street led to the river, which had not yet lost its granite embankments. Beyond them lay the ruins of cheap working-class neighborhoods that have

recently fallen victim to the Rot.

The Professor finally caught up with the man and the girl. His old boots clattered on the ice.

“She will hear me and turn around,” the Professor wished. “If this happens, then everything will be fine.”

The couple slowed down, but the man turned around first. The wind whipped the Professor’s cold cheeks.

“Let her go!” his throat seized with a spasm. “Immediately!”

Opening his mouth, the stranger ejected a gray cloud.

“That’s where the Rot comes from,” the Professor realized. “It destroys a person from the inside and then spreads further.”

The Professor pulled the girl towards him, whispering the Teacher’s address. The small shadow darted away, and then everything around turned into darkness. The dragonfly’s wing touched his cheek, and the Professor opened his eyes.

A girl and a woman waved to him, standing on a bridge. The City was just as the Professor remembered it. The azure river danced under the wind, carrying white clouds to the bay.

“This City will not be desolate,” his lips moved for the last time. “Never.”



Nelly Shulman is a writer based in Jerusalem. Her short stories appeared on JewishFiction.net, in the Vine Leaves Press Anthology of the Best Flash Fiction, and the various literary magazines and anthologies.

WICKED
SHADOW
Press



NON – INEVITABLE EXTINCTION EVENT

IRA NAYMAN

If You Can Eat Brains There...

by FREDERICA VON McTOAST-HYPHEN, Alternate
Reality News Service People Writer

Nasir Achmajinnijab enjoyed being a New Yoricknuhemwell cab driver, in the sense that he enjoyed not starving to death in the country that welcomed him with closed fists after he came here as a refugee five years ago. But, he had to admit that he was getting tired of cleaning brains out of the back seat of his vehicle.

“I tried doing it myself,” Achmajinnijab stated, “but I was nauseous for three days. Having to use a service to clean the back seat really cuts into my income – last week, I took a fare all the way across town and only made \$2.37! Zombies – feh! If I wanted to deal with human carnage, I would have stayed in Afghaniraq!”

Although Dallas, Texawaii had the first known case of a brain-eating zombie in the United States of Vesampucceri, New Yoricknuhemwell has been hit especially hard by the influx of the undead. “The city is a major hub of international travel,” explained New Yoricknuhemwell Governor Andrew Lopomocuomo. “We welcome all kinds: buddhists...transexuals...mindless flesh-eating ghouls. It has always been our strength – now it seems to be less so...”

You might think the federal government would declare an emergency and take measures to stave off a zombie apocalypse before it got started. Sure, and you probably think that snow crabs make great dental floss. This is Earth Prime 1-6-7-1-8-2 dash Chi we’re talking about, where the good old USofV (which isn’t really either) is the world’s leading idiotocracy (government by the stupid, of the stupid, for the stupid).

At 2:37 in the morning, President Ronald McDruhitmumpf tweeped: “Everybody knows there’s no such thing as zombies! They’re probably just shooting a movie or something. all over the country! #fakestoffakenews”

“This isn’t a movie,” Achmajinnijab insisted, warily eyeing the back seat of his cab, “this is real life!”*

“This is definitely real life,” agreed Doctor Anthony Faucispendulum, a respected epidemiologist and line dancer. “There is no need to panic. You just have to take precautions when you go out of doors. Always have a shotgun or a baseball bat covered in barbed wire with you. If we all just follow CDC guidelines, we should be able to get out of this

crisis with a minimal loss of life.”

Would those be the CDC guidelines which have been changed 12 times in the last three days? The ones which currently read: “Zombies are a natural part of the cycle of life. They’re nothing to fear. Look at how comically slow they are – an 80 year-old man using a walker could outrun them. With a strong headwind. If all of the traffic lights go his way. Just go about your lives, citizens. Nothing to see, here.”

Complicating the “nothing to see, here” message was another tweep in which the President wrote: “Chiner. Wuhan brain eaters. Connect dots, people! #blamblamblameenemy” This surprisingly terse communication would launch a thousand internet conspiracies.

While it is true that zombie zero likely manifested in Wuhan, China, and the Chinese government covered it up, which allowed zombies to spread throughout the world unchecked for a month or more – Jesus bejesus, they have a lot to answer for! Still, the idea that the zombie was intentionally created in a lab to be used as a weapon against the west is far-fetched; it’s just as likely that the zombie infestation began when some scientists ate infected bat brains.

“It doesn’t matter how it started,” stated token smart person Amy Sheshutshotshitbam, looking a little green around the gills (some people think adapting to live underwater could save the human race). “The point is: now that zombies are here, what are we going to do about them?”

The Grey House announced that it is going to have a garden party for their latest Extreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaughheylno.

“We’re doomed,” token smart person Sheshutshotshitbam moaned. She was undoubtedly practising for the day she would become a mindless brain-eater.

* Actually, in the multiverse, everything is simultaneously a movie, real life, a television situation comedy, a short story, a comic book, a television drama and a series of interwoven haiku illustrated by fuzzily printed woodcuts. The problem is, no matter which universe you

live in, you think it's real. Except if your story is that you don't think the universe you live in is real (what some psychiatrists and three star restaurant sous-chefim call *The Matrix Delusion*). But uhh, that's a subject for another article.

The News Waits For No Zombie

by ELMORE TERADONOVICH, Alternate Reality News Service Film and Television Writer

Midway through a rant on Critical Race Theory being taught to kindergarteners (even though it is written at a second year law school level – it must be a class of five year-old Lex Dontcallusluthers!), Sean Hanjoboverfist had his brains eaten by a zombie. Nobody knows how the undead representative got past security at Foxindehenhaus studios: she may have been a producer on *Foxindehenhaus and Fiends* (her face was grey and gashed, unrecognizable, but she was clutching a Gucci purse that the producer was known to be fond of – ah, Gucci! If anything can accessorize well with a dirty, ragged, torn power suit, it's a Gucci purse!).

Ever loyal to Rupert Murdochhyerpayroo, Hanjoboverfist finished his rant (“Woke left...indoctrination...endocrine nation...brainwashing – mmm, brains...”) before producers decided to go to a commercial. The commercial break lasted over 20 minutes; before an ad for gold coins could be run for a seventh time, a dishevelled Brian Kiss-Meadekilmeadenow appeared on the screen and explained that Hanjoboverfist had had a “medical emergency” and might have to “spend a few days in hospital,” so viewers would just have to “stand down and stand by...to quote someone we all know and love.”

“Eating a Foxindehenhaus news anchor is just putting so many empty calories into your body,” commented token smart person Amy Sheshutshotshitbam. “Really, they're the smores of television news. This just proves how mindless zombies really are!”

Within minutes, the President Ronald McDruhitmumpf disinformation machine went into action: he tweeped, “No such thing as zombies. Hoaxiest hoax of hoaxes ever! Sean has encephalitis of the kneecaps! Wishing him a speedy recovery! #goodvibes4goodpeeps”

A few minutes after that, Foxindehenhaus News sent out a press release that, although signed by some low level grunt nobody had ever heard of, fairly reeked of owner Rupert Murdochhyerpayroo’s contempt for his viewers. “What’s all this tosh about brain-eating zombies getting into the studio? Utter rot – and I’m not talking about the flesh hanging off the bones of zombies, because everybody knows there’s no such thing as the undead! The only brains being eaten at the Foxindehenhaus studio are the ones served in the cafeteria on Thursdays. Why do you think the dish is called Prion Surprise?”

The press release went on to say: “Sean is a great investigative journalist, one with the ability to walk a fine line between giving our audience what it wants and what the company’s finances require. You think it’s easy? You try it some time! Harrumph! We wish him a quick and complete recovery.”

“Unbelievable!” token smart person Sheshutshotshitbam marvelled, not in a comic book kind of way. “Foxindehenhaus is trying to convince its viewers that zombies don’t exist **even though they all saw it on live television!** Of course...90 per cent of them have already erased the image of Sean Hanjoboverfist’s brains being used as so much finger food by a zombie from their memories, so...if you’ve ever wondered why token smart persons experience so much opioid addiction...”

Other Foxindehenhaus on-air...whatever you think they dos have

–

“I wasn’t finished!” token smart person Sheshutshotshitbam insisted.

Sorry about that. When somebody engages in a rhetorical question that ends with an ellipse, I just naturally assume...

“Murdochhyerpayroo is a hypocrite!” token smart person Sheshutshotshitbam accused. “At the same time as his anchors are calling

zombies a hoax, he has introduced a strict new anti-zombie policy that requires that any employee who looks like they are about to eat another employee's brains is to be immediately terminated with extreme prejudice – a gunshot to the head!"

When asked about the apparent contradiction, Murdochhyperpay-roo stated, "Of course our policy is a gunshot to the head. Everybody knows that's the only way to kill the bloody things!" When I tried to point out that he had evaded the essence of the question, he had one of his bodyguards escort me off his yacht.

Touchy touchy.

Ask Amritsar How Much Friendship Bites

Dear Amritsar,

My husband Bob and I have been friends with Ted and Alice since the four of us met cute (it involved three sets of skis, 27 yaks and a coconut cream pie; Hallmark has optioned the rights for a TV movie) at Yale (the lock company, not the university) over a decade ago. Through all of the ups and downs of life, the four of us have been inseparable (the organ transplants really sealed that deal, let me tell you!).

Recently, Ted and Alice adopted a zombie lifestyle. Their apartment is covered in gore; it looks like they got Jackson Pollock to decorate it, but demanded that the only colour he use be red. They also have taken a vow of moaning, which makes small talk while playing bridge a lot harder, let me tell you! A lot harder!

Ted and Alice are supposed to be hosting our weekly pot-luck dinner on Thursday. Since the recent switch to zombieism, the only thing they will eat is brains. I tried tempting them with cauliflower with a creamy cheese sauce last week, but they took one bite and spit it all over my good China! (To be fair, they had the same reaction before they became zombies; I know I should stop using the good China when they come over for the weekly pot-luck, but I just love them so much!)

I was open to bringing a brains casserole, but they insist that I use fresh ingredients, and **GROSS!** I'm not going to kill anybody in my condo, even though so many of them richly deserve it, just so I can make an acceptable dish for the weekly pot-luck!

What should I do?

Carol Conway-Corova

Hey, Babe,

This is a timely question as more and more Vesampuccerians are adopting zombieism as a way of life.

Generally speaking, a guest at a dinner party should only bring dishes that are acceptable to the hosts. Partially, this is to ensure that more than the person who brought the dish will partake of it; partially, this is a gesture of kindness. And, kindness is always welcome, especially in these dark times filled with horror.

Feel free to knock off some of your fellow condo members. In today's housing market, you can rest assured that they will be quickly replaced.

I suspect that this isn't your most pressing question, though, is it?

Dear Amritsar,

Wow. You are good.

Bob and I want to respect our friends' life choices, but we have discussed it and we really don't want to join the zombie movement. Bob has seen the careers of people he respects at the insurance company where he works stall because of a steel anti-zombie ceiling. I don't want to go to the trouble of redecorating the apartment now that I have finally gotten it where I want it (except for Bob's framed, signed picture of Roger Rabbit and Keanu Reeves, but that's the kind of sacrifice we're supposed to make for those we love, isn't it?).

We were thinking of bringing a gift to the dinner party. A loaded shotgun, for example. Or, a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire. We recognize that we would be more likely to make use of the gift than

Ted or Alice, but we would feel more comfortable if we brought something like a weapon. A lot more comfortable. Like, really a lot more comfortable.

We know it's a bit of a *faux pas*, but can we get away with *ca*?

Carol Conway-Corova

Hey, Babe,

I'm sorry, but no amount of French would be able to overcome the serious social transgression you are contemplating. You understand that bringing a gift to a party that only you are likely to use is an insult to your host; I appreciate your sensitivity on this subject. However, the issue goes much deeper than that: bringing a weapon to a party for the express purpose of killing your host can be seen as a hostile act.

Because it is a hostile act.

If you are this afraid of your host, may I suggest that you find an excuse to not attend the party? I understand that headaches, the perennial favourite, are quite in vogue these days.

Dear Amritsar,

Rrrrrrr! Bob and me now zombies! Brain casserole was big hit! Thnx!

Caraaaawwwrrrrr

Hey, Babe,

I love problems that solve themselves.

Send your relationship problems to the Alternate Reality News Service's sex, love and technology columnist at questions@lespagesauxfolles.ca. Amritsar Al-Falloudjianapour is not a trained therapist, but she does know a lot of stuff. AMRITSAR SAYS: if you look around the dinner table and you can't see the sacrificial human, it's probably you.

It's All Greek to Them

by FRANCIS GRECOROMACOLLUDEN, Alternate Reality
News Service National Politics Writer

First there was Alpha, and that was okay
Because they were slow, and everybody could run away

Next came Beta, and that was alright
Because they may have been faster, but they didn't know how to
fight

After that we saw Gamma, oh oh
Are they evolving tactics? We just don't know

Now we have Delta, but have no fear
The human race will be dead in a year
- Country Joe and the Fishwrap

Yeah, protest songs haven't gotten any better since the sixties,
have they?

As the body count mounts and entire cities go silent, the Grey House has refused to acknowledge the zombie problem. Chief of Staff Mark Meadabiggblubratt, for example, recently told the press: "Look, I'm not saying that times aren't tough. However, what we're facing in this country is nothing more than the flu. A form of the flu with very sharp teeth? Sure. A form of the flu that hunts you down and bites off the top of your head? Those are just rumors. And cell-phone videos on YahooTube. And, Ticktalk. And, Farcebook. And, Twitherd. And, on the nightly news. But, we've survived worse. So, tell you what: go shopping. Send your kids to school. And, before you know it, this whole thing will blow ov - what?"

An aide had pulled the Chief of Staff aside. While he was press

conferencing, President Ronald McDruhitmumpf had tweeped: “Yeah, okay, you got us. Zombies. Waddyagonnado? But, you know, the army? The one I’ve been calling corrupt and incompetent for the last eight months? Well, they’ve got a plan to deal with the problem. Did I call it a problem? Pfft! Barely an inconvenience! Looks like we’ll just have to learn to live with the zombies. #zombiesaintnobigthang”

Chief of Staff Meadabiggblubratt looked like he had just swallowed an anvil. Any politician with a shred of self-respect would have ended the press conference at once. Hell, any politician with the slightest atom of dignity would have quit Chief of Staffing on the spot!

Instead, Chief of Staff Meadabiggblubratt said through gritted teeth, “Okay. The policy – the policy is now that zombies are here to stay and that we’re just going to have to learn to live with them.”

“Why has the policy changed?” Pulippitzaner Prize winning columnist for the *Washburningdington Post* Eugene Robinsoncrusoe asked.

“It hasn’t changed,” the Chief of Staff argued. “This has always been the policy, and it will always be the policy. Anything else is just a figment of your imagination. And, you have always had a very active imagination, Gene!”

“I’m not the one writing fiction, here,” Robinsoncrusoe mumbled.

“Mark,” Grey House journalist Yamiche Alcindorblockade asked, “is it true that President McDruhitmumpf and most of his cabinet are now zombies?”

“The President has always been open to alternative lifestyles,” Chief of Staff Meadabiggblubratt replied. “If he is a...a differently lived individual, it is so that he can learn what it is like so that he can deal with them better. Not to worry. He has the best doctors in the world trying to figure out a way to reverse the process.”

Alcindorblockade shook her head. “Mark, Mark, Mark, Mark, Mark,” she followed up, “wasn’t there something...inconsistent in the President claiming that the zombie infestation was a hoax when he, himself had been bitten and turned?”

Rather than answer her question, Chief of Staff Meadabiggblubratt

pointed at a figure in the back of the room missing half its face, flies buzzing around its filthy clothes, and said, “Johnathan, do you have any questions?”

“Yeaahhhrrrrrrrr!” moaned Jonathan Acedrefluxion, a “reporter” for the Vesampucceri Own Network (VON). “Why everybody hate zombies? Grrrrrrrrrrrr! Zombies just regular folks! Uuuuuuuuuuugh! Zombies just trying to get by in crazy world! Aaaaaaaaarrrrrrrr! Why everybody hate us?”

Chief of Staff Meadabiggblubratt answered with a 20 minute exploration of the McDruhitmumpf administration’s inclusivity policies.

“This is crazy!” Alcindorblockade told me over the phone after the press conference. “The government knew that zombies were a real threat to Vesampucceri, but they acted like nothing bad was happening. Who knows how much death and suffering could have been avoided if they had taken the zombie uprising seriously from the beginning – hey, what are you doing? Get out of here – **get away from me! No! No! Aaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrggghh!**”

The line went dead.

In the End, The Metaphor Cuts Both Ways

by MARA VERHEYDEN-HILLIARD, Alternate Reality News Service Disasters Writer

A half dozen people huddled in 360, The Restaurant at the CN Tower. They had disabled the elevator to ensure that zombies could not follow them up using it. The elk steak had run out the previous week, and supplies of arctic char were running low, but there was enough alcohol to ensure that, when the time came, nobody would be feeling any pain.

And, the time was definitely coming. The zombies, probably Deltas, were forming a pyramid to reach the windows of the restaurant. Granted, 114 storeys would require a lot of zombies; if they pulled it

off, it would most certainly be a record, although there was no longer any Guinnesspalealemug heir to proclaim it.

"I have a ball with Lucille," Negan Anonymousmith was saying, taking practice swings with a baseball bat covered in barbed wire. "Long after you guys with your guns run out of ammo, she will be by my side helping me kill zombies!"

Arnetta Larkindaparkin shook her head. "You have to let them get close to use it. It could leave you too exposed. A machine gun allows you to off the bastards before they can get close enough to you to do you any damage. And, when you run out of ammo, you can tape a knife to the rifle of your gun, and you have a bayonet!"

"Flaming banana daiquiris on a bed of walruses!" a voice plaintively cried.

All eyes turned to the small woman huddled under a table. "Yeah," Anonymousmith finally snorted. "We thought having a token smart person would give us an survival advantage. All she's done is eat us out of house and blackened mint-dusted halibut and run down our stores of Pinot Grigio!"

Cellphone reception died two months ago. A short-wave radio the group brought with them gets nothing but static. As far as they can tell, they may be the last human beings on Earth.

"It doesn't make sense, does it?" commented Major Henry Westeroswinter. "Once they've eaten us, the zombies will have no food left. They'll die out. Oh, sure, mindless and all, I get that. But some of the variants seem quite cunning - you would have thought they would have figured that out."

"We were ready to burn the world to the ground in the name of profit," Larkindaparkin pointed out. "If you want to understand the short-sightedness of the zombies, maybe you should consider where they came from!"

"Fair point. Fair point," Major Westeroswinter allowed.

"And, anyway, what would they have done if they had figured that out?" said a man in a crisp white shirt who asked to be identified as "Shaun" with a shudder. "Put us on farms and harvested us for our

brains? No. Thank. You. Very much!"

"Acceptable losses in Kleenex boxes!" shouted the token smart person in the corner. "Cabbage crates coming across the briny! **Cabbage crates coming across the briny!**"

"Is it too late to throw her at the zombie chain below us?" Larkindaparkin rhetorically asked. "It might slow them down a bit..."

"We've been through this before," Anonymousmith growled. "The windows don't open."

"A girl can dream, can't she?" Larkindaparkin pouted.

A few minutes later, Major Westeroswinter picked a bottle of Merlot off the bar. "Nobody's gonna miss this," he commented as he opened it and stuffed a menu down its throat.

"Whatcha doing?" Larkindaparkin asked.

"Making a Moosejaw Molotov," Major Westeroswinter informed him.

"I always thought Moosejaw was a boring place," Larkindaparkin said.

"It was. We learned how to make our own fun. Now seems like a good time to break out cigars..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know the Dumboprat narrative is that Reduhblicans are responsible for the zombie apocalypse," Anonymousmith said as he sucked on a big cigar a few minutes after that. "But, for me, it perfectly represents the way gliberal mind-control slowly permeated every aspect of Vesampuccerian society. The metaphor cuts both ways."

I asked if there was any point in continuing a culture war when there was no longer any culture to be at war over.

Anonymousmith spat at my feet. "Only a radical glibtard would think that way!"

Before I could follow up on that, the sound of tinkling glass alerted everybody in the room that the zombie pyramid had finally reached the top of the tower. Major Westeroswinter grinned. "Show ti—"

At that point, I activated the chip in my head and dialed the

emergency evacuation protocol number - 967-1111 - and was taken back to the Alternate Reality News Service's headquarters on Earth Prime. Zombies? Please - I've faced worse. What I feared more than anything? What Editrix-in-Chief Brenda Brundtland-Govanni would do to me if I died without filing my article on the end of the world!

Ira Nayman is a humorous speculative fiction writer. Eight of his novels have been published by Elsewhen Press; two dozen of his short stories have appeared in various publications. He was also the editor of *Amazing Stories* for three years, and is currently editing the anthology *The Dance*.



DESPERATE DECISIONS

DAWN DEBRAAL

At night, during the darkest hour, Conway would glance out the window of his cabin, feeling he could make out a faint glow of red in the sky. Was it this close, or was he imagining it? Radio communications ceased a few days ago. The smoke-filled air

choked him when he went outside. He wondered how long his solar equipment would work without the strong sunshine recharging the batteries. Living in the desert, Conway hoped the lack of vegetation would prevent the fires from burning across his land. How odd to think the world was on fire and nothing could stop it. Lack of rain and climate change had tilted the world too far in one direction. He looked out the window, waiting for the arrival of the truck he'd hired.

Conway paid most of what he had left in the world to transport his adult children to a better place. They might not survive, but at least he was giving them a chance to live longer, and who knows, by some miracle, they could put the inferno out before it reached the end of the world.

"Dad, I don't like leaving you behind." Curt, his eldest, said.

"I can only afford transportation for two of you. I am old and don't have many years left, even if I escaped this fate. It is more important to me to ensure you two are safe."

"Dad, we would rather stay here with you; we'll die together." Rachael, his daughter, said. Their bags were packed, sitting before the door, waiting for transport. It cost him his life savings, but money didn't buy anything in a world with little left for sale. Today's trip was paid for months ago when he heard the fires were headed this way. He hoped the company he hired was honest because there were no courts to take them to if they reneged on the deal. Looking out the window, he saw dirt rising in the distance and knew it was the vehicle he hired.

"They're here." There was a flurry of hugging, kissing and well-wishing, as he watched his children carry their belongings out on the porch. When the truck stopped, he was astonished to see there was barely standing room for his children.

"Leave the stuff behind." A guard told them gruffly. "Things await you at the other end of our journey." Curt looked at his father, pleading to stay and risk it, but Conway shook his head.

"Take what you can carry." They rummaged through the bags, putting on extra clothes and taking some food with them. At the end of the truck, they were pulled into the back, and he waved goodbye to his

children.

Tears streamed down his face, thinking he would never see Curt or Racheal again. Life as he knew it was gone in a few months when the fire caught up with him. It was a miserable time to be alive on this earth. He became angry, why was he sitting here waiting to die? He should go after his kids and try to live his life as long as he could, being with them.

Conway packed the children's wagon with food and tarps. He would walk every day away from the burning and head for where he hoped life would be saved. He had paid for his children to go to a safe community in the mountains with snow caps, according to the brochure. There, they would live underground until the fire passed over them.

Conway left the following morning, pulling the children's wagon behind him. Water was the heaviest item and the wagon would get lighter with each passing day. He would need to find a place to replenish it, and that worried him. He had some sterilizing tablets in his backpack. He'd packed the bag with immediate needs should he have to escape and abandon the wagon: a space-age blanket, some ready-to-eat meals, and a jug of water. Conway carried a knife and a small side arm with another clip in the backpack. He was crazy to leave the comfort of his home, but he still had some life in him in his sixties and decided he wasn't going to lie down and die.

As he trudged along, he was grateful his deceased wife, Molly, didn't live long enough to see this horrible situation. She would have never allowed Curt and Rachael to be separated from them. He had done the unthinkable and sent them off, hoping they'd be saved.

Conway stopped and took a long drink of water, watching the heat rising in the distance. He knew he had several miles yet before leaving the desert. Looking back on the last few years of his life he thought about the years of drought. What rain that came wasn't enough to replenish the water tables and the world had become a tinderbox. Wars were waged over a trickle of water still in the rivers. Groundwater had been pumped to the point of earthquakes trying to

provide farmers with enough to grow food.

When war broke out between those with water and those without, the fires started. Winds whipped a firewall across cities and fields without putting them out. It took a long time before the smoke began to interfere with his home in the desert, where he'd foolishly thought he was safe. He couldn't take his vehicle because there was no gas to be purchased. He wondered how the man in the truck could get enough gas to pick up his children and drive them to safety. Black Market, no doubt. Someone had a source, and it cost a pretty penny to buy a gallon. Everything had changed, and the world had become a desperate place to live. He wondered if he should have sent his children out into the world. At least at the desert home, they were out of the mainstream and protected from the evil that the world had become. But they were only safe until the fires came. He put one foot in front of the other, feeling foolish that an old man would try to follow his family on foot. He would have been comfortable back at the house where he had everything he needed. It wasn't until the house was empty that he realized how his decision affected him, he couldn't be alone. Conway would go mad without television, radio, or voices telling him what was happening in the outside world. He felt so disconnected that he would rather face the danger of society than to be hidden away. If only he'd paid passage for himself spending the rest of his money to escape, even if it only bought him a few more months of life. At least he'd have someone. His eyes raised to the sky, where he saw vultures circling above. Something died not too far from where he was. The vultures were a sure sign of death, and he hoped it wasn't a sign of things to come. At least the poor sap wouldn't feel the heat of the fires in the end. Maybe an early death was a blessing in disguise, taking away the fear of burning alive.

He stopped to watch the scurrying of a scorpion crossing his path. Even the wildlife sensed that something was off with the world. When the scorpion was out of sight, Conway picked up the wagon handle and kept moving. After a short distance, the faint smell of smoke in the air. He knew it wasn't part of the great fire, because this fire was something different, there was a smell of fuel intermixed with the smoke. Curious,

he turned in that direction as the detour would take him only a short distance from where he was going. Conway's gut told him he should stick with the direction he had chosen, but he had to know.

Taking the backpack with him he climbed to the top of the rise. He looked back to see the wagon still on the road below. When he made it to the crest of the hill, he found the remnants of a truck still smoldering, recognizing the vehicle.

"Oh God, no!" His arms windmilled down the steep embankment. He tripped, crashing to the ground, he heard the unmistakable crunch of his leg breaking. Conway cried in agony while he stared at the vehicle that had been full of people, evident by the skeletons in the back. All that was left were smoking bones. His hands went to his head, he screamed inconsolably. What should have been his children's deliverance ended in their premature deaths. Was this an accident, or had it been the smugglers' plan? They preyed on desperate people willing to part with what cash they had for safe transport, never to make it to their destinations. It had all been a cruel ruse.

"You bastards!" He shouted to the circling vultures. Conway had no spirit to move on. The little water he carried would not sustain him until his leg healed enough to walk to the mountains. He was ready to die admitting defeat. With a broken leg, he faced a slow agonizing death, everything he loved and lived for, his wife and children, were gone, and the end of the world was just beyond the horizon coming closer every day. Why should he go on? Rummaging around in the back pack he pulled the gun and held the pistol to his head.

In the distance, two hikers heard a single pistol shot and headed for the sound.

"Come on, Rachael, there's someone over there by the smoke." They had escaped last night after hearing the truck driver talk to the other man on how they planned to turn back into the desert the following morning to kill their cargo. There was never a plan to transport the people who had paid them to take them to the mountains. Curt pulled Rachael from the rest escaping into the night; they would return home to stay with their father.

They did not recognize the wagon of their childhood on the road climbing the hill. When they reached the top, they looked down to see the smoking truck and the circling vultures overhead.

"That could have been us," Racheal whispered to her brother.

"Wait, there's someone on the ground. They could still be alive." Curt started down the hill, unaware that the man on the ground was their father, who had taken his life, because he couldn't face a world without them.



Dawn DeBaal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband, Red, a dorky dog and a stray cat. She has published over 600 drabbles, short stories, and poems in online ezines and anthologies, including Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, Clarendon House Publishing, Zimbel House Publishing, Terror House Magazine, CafeLit UK, Potato Soup Journal, Impspired Magazine, Commuter Lit, The World of Myth, Valiant Scribe, Wicked Shadow Press, Unsettling Reads, and more. She co-wrote a novel under the pen name of Garrison McKnight, nominated for 2019 Pushcart Award, Falling Star Magazine, runner up in the 2022 Horror Short Story Contest. Visit <https://linktr.ee/dawndebral>



THE REMEDY

ARUN HARIHARAN

The year 2097 unfolded as a desolate chapter in the annals of history, a grim tapestry woven with the threads of chaos and unrelenting despair. The world lay ensnared in the icy clutches of a harrowing and unprecedented pandemic, a relentless affliction that had acquired the ominous and infamous moniker of "MorbiusX." This devastating malady was no ordinary disease; it was an insidious force that seeped into the very fabric of society, leaving a trail of unparalleled devastation in its wake.

MorbiusX was not a mere adversary; it was a relentless juggernaut of suffering and affliction. Its origins were shrouded in mystery, its characteristics ever-evolving, and its manifestations grotesque. It left in its path a landscape marred by excruciating agony, where the afflicted writhed in pain, their bodies contorted by the torment of an ailment that seemed impervious to all known remedies.

The haunting spectre of death loomed omnipresent, as the pandemic showed no mercy, claiming lives indiscriminately. Families were torn asunder, communities decimated, and entire nations gripped by a sense of hopelessness. It was a time when fear and uncertainty had become the new normal, and the world yearned for a glimmer of hope in the abyss.

In the face of this relentless adversary, the indomitable spirit of humanity was tested to its limits. As the world grappled with the dire consequences of MorbiusX, individuals like Dr. Ashita stood as beacons of resilience, seeking answers and solutions in a world besieged by the darkest of plagues.

Dr. Ashita,³⁹ stood as an embodiment of dedication and remarkable expertise. Her journey through life had seen her ascend to the pinnacle of her profession, earning acclaim as a distinguished surgeon. She had mastered her craft through countless hours of tireless devotion, honing her skills to a level of virtuosity that set her apart from her peers. Her life's calling had revolved around the noble art of healing, a mission dedicated to mending the broken and alleviating the suffering of those in her care. Her hands, once instruments of intricate surgery, had brought solace to innumerable souls, offering a promise of renewed health and a respite from pain.

However, in the tumultuous era defined by the ominous presence of the MorbiusX pandemic, her role had metamorphosed. She had become a relentless seeker of solutions, a tenacious pursuer of answers in the face of unyielding adversity. In this new reality, Dr. Ashita's mission extended beyond the confines of the operating theatre. It encompassed a broader quest, one that involved unearthing the secrets of a perilous pathogen and offering a glimmer of hope to a world on the

brink of catastrophe.

Defying all odds after losing her entire family to the deadly virus, she had become an integral member of a global coalition of scientists and physicians, united in their frantic mission to find a cure for the crippling and devastating pandemic that had swept through the world with astonishing speed. Hailing from the ancient Mughal metropolis of Agra, known for its iconic Taj Mahal, just to the south of Delhi, she bore witness to the relentless march of the disease, which voraciously devoured entire neighbourhoods at a viral pace. In this once-majestic city, where the white marble beauty of the Taj Mahal once stood as a symbol of love and grandeur, now, its shadow was cast against a backdrop of despair as the pandemic tightened its grip.

Undeterred by the heightened gravity of the situation, she embarked on a perilous solo odyssey in her Tesla pickup, setting her course for Delhi, driven by the elusive promise of a functioning hospital rumoured to hold the key to a potential cure.

Hour after harrowing hour, Ashita journeyed through the bleak and desolate wastelands that had overtaken the once magnificent Agra Expressway. This once proud symbol of modernity now stood pocked with eerie, abandoned toll plazas and littered with the grim remnants of decay – the haunting presence of decaying corpses and forsaken vehicles. Fortunately, a relentless sun illuminated her path, providing the essential power her Tesla needed through its solar panels, in a region starved of electricity for a devastating three days.

Every pause, every moment of respite along the way proved perilous, for the countryside had fallen victim to a nightmarish transformation. Feral and rabid stray dogs roamed unchecked, creating an additional layer of danger in her path. Yet, Ashita's unwavering commitment pressed her forward, determined to locate and reach the enigmatic last beacon of hope: Curewell Hospital & Research Centre. This elusive establishment was rumoured to be one of the exceedingly rare places globally where the affliction was genuinely being combated, and hope was not just a whisper but a tangible reality.

Upon entering Delhi, once the proud capital of India, the world's

second-largest economy, Ashita found herself confronted by the desolation that had gripped the city. It was a melancholic tableau, a stark contrast to the thriving metropolis it had once been. Each step she took into the heart of this forsaken place revealed the depth of its ruin.

As she traversed the desolate streets, the city whispered tales of its bygone glory through the cracked pavements and shattered facades. The once-bustling markets were now abandoned, their storefronts covered in layers of dust, and the vibrant colours that once adorned them had faded into melancholic shades of grey. The people, once the lifeblood of the city, had vanished, leaving behind an eerie silence that clung to the air. The air itself seemed heavy with anguish, as if the very atmosphere mourned the loss of vitality. The stench of decay, a mixture of dampness, rot, and abandonment, permeated the air with a suffocating weight. It was as though the very soul of the city had been consumed by an insatiable darkness, leaving behind only the remnants of its former self.

The sun, casting long and eerie shadows upon the twisted and crumbling cityscape, seemed to be a mere spectre of its former self. Its feeble light struggled to penetrate the thick layers of smog and gloom that hung over the city. The once-great buildings, now reduced to skeletal frames, reached for the heavens in a silent plea for redemption.

Ashita's heart pounded within her chest as she stumbled upon a decaying edifice, its rusted sign bearing the solemn name "Curewell Hospital & Research Centre." It stood as a grim monument to the city's fall from grace. With trembling hands, she pushed open the heavy glass doors, the only sign of life amidst the surrounding desolation. It was an act driven by a glimmer of hope in the abyss, a hope that perhaps somewhere within this forsaken place, a beacon of salvation remained.

Inside, the once bustling hospital had withered into a spectral sanctuary. The acrid, sterile scent of antiseptic still lingered in the air, but it had lost its reassuring quality, now serving as a reminder of the life that had once thrived within these walls. The faint, eerie hum of flickering fluorescent lights added to the unsettling atmosphere, casting long and ominous shadows on the peeling, blood-red wallpaper that clung des-

perately to the walls. It was a cruel reminder of the resilience that had been tested and ultimately broken in the face of an unforgiving fate.

Unsettled but resolute, Ashita ventured deeper into the labyrinthine corridors of this melancholic place, her footsteps echoing through the eerie silence. In the midst of such desolation, she carried with her a fragile ember of hope, the belief that even in the darkest of times, the human spirit could endure and, with luck, find a way to rekindle the light that had been extinguished by the relentless tide of despair.

Ashita's journey down the winding corridor continued, her footsteps echoing softly against the cold linoleum floor. With each step, a fragile glimmer of hope began to rekindle in her weary heart. She couldn't help but hold her breath, her anticipation growing as she followed the faint echoes of footsteps around each corner.

Turning yet another corner, she came face to face with a group of individuals shrouded in lab coats, their faces obscured by masks. The dim lighting cast eerie shadows, making them seem like spectral figures in this forsaken place.

"Thank the heavens you've arrived," one of them mumbled, their words barely audible through the layers of protective fabric. "We've been waiting for you."

Ashita was surprised by their knowledge of her arrival, and a mix of relief and curiosity washed over her. She was eager to fulfil her mission, the purpose that had led her into this desolate hospital.

However, the staff members were a puzzle unto themselves. Their faces hidden behind masks, their eyes seemed strangely vacant, devoid of the usual warmth and emotion. Their movements were unnaturally precise, almost robotic, as if they were bound by some invisible thread of compliance.

With cautious steps, Ashita followed her enigmatic guides to an impeccably clean operating room. The sterile environment stood in stark contrast to the dilapidation she had encountered in other parts of the hospital. Here, every surface gleamed with antiseptic assurance.

The staff, still wearing their masks and lab coats, gestured for her

to examine a patient lying motionless on the surgical table. The scene was a nightmarish tableau of suffering. The patient's body was marred by grotesque, oozing sores, and their skin bore the pallid, sickly hue of the disease.

As Ashita attempted to diagnose the patient, her voice quivered in shock. She couldn't help but recoil from the horrifying sight before her. "This is unlike any case I've seen before," she whispered, her words trembling in the sterile air. "The disease has progressed beyond recognition."

The staff's insistence on an immediate procedure hung in the air like a heavy, foreboding cloud, promising a revolutionary treatment. Ashita, caught between the desperation to save the patient and her nagging instincts, felt a profound sense of unease. The urgency of the situation overpowered her judgment, and she reluctantly agreed to proceed.

As she prepared for the operation, an unsettling chill crept into her very bones, a shiver that seemed to emanate from the sterile walls of the operating room. The air became thick with a sense of impending malevolence, though its source remained elusive.

As Ashita commenced the surgery, she soon realized that the staff members were not there to assist her in the traditional sense. Instead, they began chanting incantations in a strange and archaic tongue. The low murmurs slowly escalated into an eerie crescendo, and it was only then that Ashita comprehended the gravity of the situation. Their collective focus was not on saving the patient but on something far more obscure and sinister, a ritualistic and forbidden pursuit that transcended the boundaries of modern medicine.

Panic surged within her as she beheld this bizarre turn of events. "What are you all doing? Help me!" she pleaded, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and desperation. Her medical training and rationality clashed with the surreal and unsettling spectacle unfolding before her.

Then, in an instant, the inexplicable occurred. The patient's eyes opened, and his grotesque ulcers appeared to miraculously heal before Ashita's bewildered eyes. It defied all logic and reason, leaving her with

a growing sense of dread and disbelief. "This is not possible," she thought, her heart pounding, as the true nature of the staff's intentions became terrifyingly clear, and she found herself entangled in a web of the obscure and the inexplicable.

Suddenly, Ashita's strength began to wane, and a wave of weakness washed over her, leaving her feeling faint and helpless. A searing sensation spread across her body, causing her to gasp in pain. She glanced down at her forearm in horror, only to witness the rapid emergence of large, festering sores. The realization struck her like a sledgehammer, plunging her into a paralyzing sense of dread.

With mounting horror, Ashita came to understand the grim truth. The "treatment" the staff had promised was, in fact, a malevolent ritual, designed not to heal but to transfer the disease from the patient to her. The ghastly realization sent shockwaves of terror through her. Desperation propelled her into action, and she fought with every ounce of her strength, but the sinister chanting from the staff grew louder and more intense, filling the room with an ominous energy that seemed to sap her will.

As her vision faded and the oppressive darkness claimed her, Ashita realized with a sinking heart that she had not found the cure she had sought. Instead, she had become an integral component of the grotesque and horrifying remedy that kept the sinister hospital operational at the fringes of a world consumed by the relentless and unforgiving pestilence, a cruel and ironic twist of fate in the face of her noble intentions.



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WICKED
SHADOW
Press



WE ARE THEIR LIVESTOCK

CHRISTOPHER T. DABROWSKI
TRANSLATED BY JULIA MRACZNY

We suck their life energy - that's why they die early.
We like it best mixed with suffering - we torment them.
But you can't take away their hope - we have the chosen ones

who succeed in everything but at first, face many obstacles. That motivates the gullible, who suffer when it doesn't work for them.

We slow down their technological development by pestering them with religions - bearded 'miracle workers' and faith rulers stall their progress.

And when they develop too much, we get rid of their world leaders.

After World War III - we'll invent a new religion for survivors...

CHRISTOPHER T. DABROWSKI is a widely published author from Kraków, Poland who has published books and has been part of anthologies in USA, England, Australia, Poland, Russia, Germany & India as well as magazines in Slovakia, Czech Republic, Russia, Brasil, Spain, Argentina, Italy, Hungary, Mexico, Albania & Nigeria.



THE TARDY HAND OF MISS TANGERINE

JON MICHAEL KELLEY

Her departing gift to me—a beneficence, let's call it—was a tattoo of letters and numbers across my chest, taut as clothesline between the areolas, drawn in her own hand. A font so gracefully balanced and femininely stylized that it seems to flow upon

gentle currents: willowy beginnings rolling into tighter lowercase, slanting a bit left, with the last letter's descender, or stroke, plunging down and finishing in a tight, grasping coil, much like the prehensile tail of a seahorse.

Wangari, it reads, *14 May 2021 Must Hurry*, followed by a methodical placement of eraser-size dots, all drawn by a lover who fueled this and other divinations with a diet of pulpy fruit.

It has been four years since she magically scored this riddle into my flesh, though it didn't begin appearing until five weeks ago, taking three of those to reach full maturity, its color now that of forest green in shadow. This happened just after the spring equinox, and having known her to be an avid botanist I cannot entirely dismiss its blossoming along with the columbine and forsythia as coincidental.

Wangari. An exotic name that turns out to be Kenyan in origin, specific to females. And that date, curiously military in its orientation, is obviously portending some kind of event. Well, I should amend that present participle, as the date in question has already passed some months ago, long before it ever began appearing on my skin. And I've looked from earthquakes to sunspots, tsunamis to polar shifts, hoping to validate my suspicions that some kind of connection exists between that date, that name, and something catastrophic or remarkably momentous. After all, those gifted with prescience seem never to waste their talents on things inconsequential, at least when committing their predictions to the written word. Nostradamus didn't burden his quatrains with frivolous market trends in aquarium fish sales, or the recurring concerns of Little League umpires.

Then, lastly, there's *Must Hurry*, which needs no explanation, followed by that peculiar sequence of dots, appearing very much like Braille, at least in cursory examination. A dead ringer for the letter T, to be exact. Just picture two colons side-by-side, then jack the right colon up one space.

I had thought of Morse code, but those characters are normally laid out horizontally. There is a visual way to learn that alphabet by superimposing each sequence of dots and dashes over its respective

letter, achieving the desired dimension, but that method does not produce the configuration on my chest; not remotely so. Nor do they appear to be, or acting as, some kind of diacritical mark, those ancillary glyphs that hang over, under or between letters, normally used to change vowel sounds.

And to confuse matters even more, this conundrum is in reverse image and needs the assistance of a mirror to become properly legible, just as your rearview mirror brings out “ambulance” when it has been spelled out backwards on the hood of such vehicles.

Although all of her predictions (at least the ones I know of) manifested in this fashion, they are of course quite decipherable on their own, as a mirror just conveniently decrypts the communiqués with less fuss. Nonetheless, having it painted this way in my flesh heightens the intrigue, as it perpetually reminds me of a chronic anxiety from which she never recovered: her *catoptrophobia*, or fear of mirrors.

I had originally assumed this malady of hers to be *eisoptrophobia*, or fear of seeing one’s own reflection, as my research into such anxieties revealed. I remain inclined, however, to favor the other term as it seems more fitting; that her fear was of someone, or something, lurking inside those silver depths, and not of her own countenance, as I had once seen her marvel over its distorted image upon a kitchen appliance.

Given those conditions, it was easy to assume why she chose to write her predictions in this backward fashion: they were simply an extension of this phobia; a kind of droll attempt at self-mockery (although I do admit this seems more like impaling oneself with fun rather than just plain poking).

Now, that remarkable resemblance I’d earlier mentioned to Braille, specifically to the letter T, needs some clarification at this point, as I was using those dots’ virtual, or mirror, image to make that comparison. And just to be thorough, I determined that the real image did not have a twin in Braille. Not that I believed Braille was going to emerge victorious in this matter, but it does raise a curious point.

As I mentioned, it happened over four years ago. We’d met our

junior year at a small but notable college, its campus nestled in the shadow of some famous peak in Colorado. It had been a clumsy meeting, as I'd been nose-in-book, aimless across the grounds, she just as engrossed in a fat, ripe peach (she'd not yet switched permanently to its smaller cousin)—and we collided.

“Christ! Watch where you're going!” I snapped.

“Sorry,” she said, not sorry at all, pulp snot-smear across her left, freckled cheek. Green eyes, strawberry blonde hair bouncing just above the shoulders, blanched skin, and an unhealthy thinness any runway model would have envied. Wearing a simple white cotton blouse, a sienna broom skirt wrinkled to a severe degree of geriatrics, and a stack of Chakra ankle bracelets bouncing above a pair of worn leather flip-flops. Well, it was early autumn and I remember thinking how suitably she imitated that season; not just in supple fibers and September hues, but with her eyes; a loitering omen there of harsher, unforgiving things ahead.

I'd detected a mild musky aroma, certainly not unpleasant, with just a pinch of vanilla extract and clove. She wasn't exactly earthy (she shaved her legs, bathed regularly, was not unaccustomed to stock cosmetics), but any highbrow distinctions were hardly forthcoming. Had I mugged her instead, I might have expected to find in her suede leather bag an ounce of hemp, the bra she had permanently removed, the peace symbol posing upon a variety of mediums, and a program from a recent Jimi Hendrix concert. Forgive me, it's cliché—but it is the best fit.

As I bent over to retrieve James Joyce, she found her nerve. “Optometrists are nothing to fear, you know. I understand they're listed alphabetically in the yellow pages.”

“Oh, you're a comedy major,” I decided, brushing pine needles from my book, clinging statically to the Mylar cover. “I would have guessed something less funny, like maybe tent weaving.”

Her peach lay nearby, traumatized. I let it lay. To hell with chivalry. She looked at me then, an arrogant aspect far too poignant for those farm-girl eyes (I'd thought Minnesota given the slight nasal lisp

in her accent, but it was Nebraska, she would tell me later). “Botany, actually,” she said, wiping a cotton sleeve across her mouth, an indelicacy which she further aggravated by extending her sticky hand. “Name’s Lisa. Lisa Coventry.”

I took it, introduced myself as a member of the campus literary club, and then asked for a napkin. And there began the most bizarre affair in the history of affairs. Two months into the relationship (sex had been fashionably early – and damned good, if you must know), we found ourselves one cold and blustery night at a hockey game. We had arrived late in the third, our team down 5-1 against the Golden Knights, NCAA champions of the previous year. The Knights went on to give our team a complete thrashing, extending their winning streak into a second season. We stayed long enough to boo our guys off the ice, then went for a hot cappuccino at Margie’s, a popular hangout just off campus, famous for its chocolate scones and jaunty ambience. A place that Lisa once said smelled of burnt umber, and one we would ultimately haunt.

And it was in just this place where I first saw her intangibly score words with her magic finger, right smack on the tabletop, third booth from the left as you entered. Words that wouldn’t appear until many weeks later; slowly at first, like the faint beginnings of a bruise, and would eventually achieve the same color: a foretelling that a much-beloved Presidential candidate would win election that November, just weeks away. And he went on to win, just as her writing predicted. He also collapsed behind his podium three and a half minutes into his acceptance speech, and later died that same evening from what the doctors eventually identified as a subarachnoid hemorrhage resulting from a ruptured brain aneurism. She had seen that too, putting it this way: Cole wins then loses big 2016. Not quite as cryptic as Nostradamus, yet refreshingly more flippant than Jeane Dixon.

Unfortunately, that electoral calamity happened many weeks before her reverse cursive began showing on that shiny gray Formica.

A belated prophecy—and bad timing is lethal, if not laughable, to the integrity of such things. Tardy, just as she often was for class, dates,

or to any function she'd been invited to, or not. And it was this immature characteristic I found out of her many to be the most taxing. Even her periods were often late, which caused me more than a few restless nights, I might add, after we'd recklessly consummated our relationship.

She never discussed or said aloud whatever she was prophesizing, each time remaining mum on those few occasions when I personally observed her finger conjure magic; magic postponed to a date so far ahead that my memory had almost forgotten that any kind of magic had been conjured at all. That first time, anyway. After the tabletop incident at Margie's, every crook, bend, and unanticipated movement of her right index finger garnered my full and undivided attention.

I learned very quickly to never inquire about such shenanigans, as she volleyed every time with a stern shake of her head, followed by an even sterner recital of that popular phrase "patience is a virtue," or some other colloquialism just as obnoxious, adding lastly but with the greatest emphasis that frigidity wasn't just something meteorologists talked about.

Of course, she had sworn me absolute secrecy; an oath I have steadfastly honored until the commencement of this personal account. She's gone now, but I'm sure there remain examples of her writing somewhere out there amid Colorado's alpine foliage; perhaps upon some park bench or fountain, the side of a boxcar, the underpinnings of a bridge, the sun-blached metal stanchion of a streetlight... All masquerading as puzzling idioms to the curious few, and just plain old reverse graffiti to the rest.

Although, to be quite honest, I believe they were mostly for my benefit; the inspiration that honed the faith that would be necessary in the end.

But if her credibility as a futurist languished in the untimely appearances of her prophecies, then by the same token it was rescued by their indelibility. Late one snowy evening I tried removing her penmanship from that tabletop at Margie's. I sat down with a paperback and ordered my usual double latte; then, when no one was looking, I

went to work with a moist pad of smuggled steel wool. And all I got for my efforts was a lesson in the durability of laminates, and one pissed off waitress, who'd finally caught me when a condiment of raw unrefined sugar was sent crashing to the floor. I never so much as dulled Lisa's writing, which at that point was still in its infancy, what I would call its watermark stage, where the outline was developing more prominently than the meat.

Not long after my bungled scrubbing, perhaps even within hours, someone replaced that table with a less expressive one. I was never able to track its relocation, having to finally surrender it to the same fog-enshrouded realms that are bequeathed such items.

After that, I never reprised those efforts upon her other predictions, those that eventually surfaced in concrete, wood, marble...

And, finally, flesh.

Lisa's nickname around campus was "Miss Tangerine," apparently coined during a previous addiction to that fruit, just shortly into her first year there. She'd gone on to abuse other orchards, most specifically of the stone fruit variety, but that tag stuck nonetheless and followed her around like a skulking dog. I suppose it was cute in the beginning but saying "Miss Tangerine" eventually felt less like an endearing moniker and more like an awaiting epitaph.

When we met, her quaint obsession with peaches was about to turn lastly and most viciously to nectarines. At first, I found her quirkiness almost endearing. I'd been around campus halls long enough to know that academia and above-average IQ's have a way of luring your more obsessed types. Take your pick; any prominent college is full of them. But it wasn't long into our relationship when I'd begun suspecting something more than just harmless eccentricity, and finally recognized it for what it was: a severe, uncontrollable addiction—as nasty as any alcoholic's—who's equivalent of delirium tremens was an uncanny ability to inscribe future events across any available surface in reverse image, only to later appear as yesterday's headlines.

I distinctly recall my first visit to her apartment, just off campus; a quaint, one room abode nestled within the cavernous interior of a Vic-

torian mansion; just one of many such structures orbiting the college, each having been vigorously renovated to the specs of a honeycomb, accommodating the mostly rich faction of college students, of which Lisa was an unpretentious member.

Tapestries were in abundance, a hand-woven assortment of verdure and floral motifs reminiscent of bygone times when pride motivated artisans to lissome heights. And I remember well the sticks of incense, pungent and poking out like quills from their soapstone burners, each of those holders acutely Asian in its carved detail. Clove was dominant, but there had been another spicy fragrance that I could not readily identify.

“Frankincense,” she’d told me. “It comes from trees of the genus *Boswellia*, native to Africa. Don’t you just love that word, *Boswellia*?”

Eager to please, I might have mentioned that it was worth a second look.

“What’s your favorite word?” she continued. “Mine’s Alabaster. Definitely my favorite word of all time. The way it just rolls off your tongue; has a kind of regal aroma. Do you have a favorite word?” she asked again.

I affected a pensive pose, then nodded with absolute certainty. “Vagina.”

“Really,” she said, feigning serious interest. “How incredibly boorish.”

“That’s me,” I agreed. “And what the hell is a ‘regal aroma’? I didn’t know one could smell words, even those of noble descent.”

She laughed and tossed me a wink that seemed out of character. “Where I come from, you can taste them, too. Wanna beer?”

So as not to appear overly affectionate for such items, I allowed just the appropriate pause before committing to an answer. And as she opened her refrigerator (one of those ancient, round corner things that always appear to be unnecessarily thick and moody), a sight was revealed that made me forget to ask her about words and their alleged flavors. Save for the top shelf where only two more bottles of beer remained and nothing else, every square inch of the interior was

crammed with boxes supplying only one kind of fruit.

"That's a shitload of peaches," I said.

"Nectarines," she corrected, handing me a longneck bottle. "They're good for you."

It was our first date, so she didn't get an argument from me, although I did caution her about the hazards one might face when overdosing on fiber.

She looked at me then, a film of desperation sliding down her eyes, where within rose unmistakable paranoia. "Do you ever get the feeling you're being watched?"

I shrugged, suddenly wondering if I was. "Not on any kind of regular basis," I said carefully. "But sure, I guess. Hasn't everyone at one time or other?"

As if preparing herself for a particularly nasty draft, she slowly crossed her arms over her chest. "How do you feel about mirrors?"

I didn't laugh, and in the brief awkwardness that followed I easily imagined the reasons behind her phobia, having assumed that it was her own reflection she wished to avoid, the culprit being some kind of self-esteem or alter-ego concern. After all, she was a wallflower who seemed quite comfortable in her solitude; a loner who preferred the company of others in measured doses. And the textbooks are full of the kinds of psychosis associated with those who inflict their own isolation.

She remained immobile, her eyes fixed, expectant; as if just the slightest movement would crack the thin sheen of anticipation that seemed to have gripped her.

"So," I began my approach, "you have a fear of mirrors? Broken or otherwise?"

She finally nodded her head; slowly, deliberately. "Oh, yes. They can't be trusted."

From then on, the evening progressed (for me, anyway) from piqued apprehension to the most incredibly ambitious lovemaking I had ever, or since, been involved. The reason I mention this again isn't to satisfy some hubristic self-image, but that the most truly interesting

thing was found as we lay in the afterglow: I saw on the windowsill of her dormer (and only) window a rather large translucent bowl, tightly lidded, inside of which rested what appeared to be a large seed of some kind. The window had been opened wide, as if she'd anticipated our fevered rendezvous. Sylphlike breathes of fall air puffed against sheer lace curtains; curtains, I remember thinking, whose embroidered design boasted a dexterity no longer viable; of a skill no longer taught.

From her bed I was able to discern some very thin objects attached to the seed but was unable to make out just what those were. So, to whet my mounting curiosity, I finally rose and strode over to the windowsill, those puzzling objects now well-defined, glinting in the invading moonlight. They were sewing needles, or things very similar. A handful of them, jutting out like alert antennae. I assumed that some kind of experiment was taking place, one obviously linked to her botanical studies, and inquired upon that theory, as I did the type of seed.

"Peach?" I guessed.

"Nectarine," she said, then confirmed that it was most definitely an experiment and asked me to please not touch the bowl or its contents. She hemmed and hawed for an explanation, finally resorting to: "Look, darlin', it's fairly complicated. Let's just say that if you don't know what you're doing, then you're better off splicing genes with a chainsaw. The placement of those pins is fundamental to the experiment's desired outcome."

"In other words, don't fuck with it," I said, keeping my hands at my sides and noting the curious analogy.

She laughed. "I'm just saying that you don't want to get too rough and disarticulate that alignment."

"And a curious one it is," I said, trying to sound erudite.

I returned to her bed, the experiment unmolested; then retreated without further delay back to the warm and comfy left side of my brain and forgot about the strange pincushion in the Tupperware bowl.

On our very next date, we found ourselves back at her place (it was always her place, as I never dared take her to mine, a bleak, windowless two-room landfill occupied by three young and excessively hormonal lads, none of whom ever saw the entrance of a finishing school, let alone its alphabetized curriculum). This second time I was more venturesome, giving extended scrutiny to what was, save for those wall hangings and a few meager attempts at furniture, a skimpy lifestyle, even for a college student. And a quick peek inside her kitchen cabinets confirmed what I had already begun suspecting: that processed food had become, for her anyway, a thing of the past.

I had also confirmed the absence of any mirrors and was once again forced to ponder the impasses one must face when boycotting those reflective surfaces. Although, in all fairness to Lisa, I should make clear that if any grooming misadventures had ever taken place, then I was never aware of them. Her countenance was always flawless, her wardrobes impeccably worn, however dated they might have been. Granted, she was plain, and if mirrors had not been banished from her walls, then I doubt she would have been bewitched by her own reflection, as Narcissus had been his. Rather, her buoyant innocence was her appeal, her beauty; and that selective naiveté that was surely intentional, a coquettish ruse to keep the rust off those girlish pretenses. Qualities no mirror could ever pretend to show.

As previously mentioned, I remembered an occurrence late in our relationship. I had caught her bent over the kitchen counter in just her pajama bottoms, staring at her toaster of brushed stainless steel, her nose nearly touching that small appliance. And despite that intimate proximity I could still see the apprehension stitched throughout her posture. She was slowly and carefully swaying left to right, right to left, intently watching her carnival image, regarding it the same way a spear-toting aboriginal does a transistor radio.

One thing that I found especially odd was the stark absence of plants. Since she was making such things her life's endeavor, I expressed mild concern that she was not at least attempting to torture a baby philodendron—if not for her own gratification, then for the gloat-

ing satisfaction of those who, like me, killed everything that photosynthesized, including plankton.

Although I didn't believe it for a second, she ashamedly admitted that her thumb was quite a few shades this side of green, always had been, but that she would nevertheless attempt another go, if only to appease my artificial concern. "Maybe some *Dracaena sanderiana*," she pondered, "or a nice starter of *Sansevieria trifurcata*. Don't you just love that word, *Sansevieria*?"

I agreed that it had a special ring to it, all the while remaining convinced that there was probably nothing Lisa Coventry couldn't grow.

One standout curiosity was a fifty-pound burlap sack, the kind used to transport coffee beans from, say, Caracas to Starbucks USA, as evidenced by the logo of some weary, mustached Venezuelan bean farmer pulling an even wearier donkey alongside, the caption reading "Arabica, El Capitán." I mention this in detail only because I'd seen identical sacks hanging empty on the walls at Margie's, so I assumed that's where Lisa had got hers. She was an avid coffee drinker, and this sack, smoldering in a distant kitchen corner, appeared half full, so I'd naturally asked her if she ground her own beans.

It was no surprise when she reached into the sack and pulled out a handful of seeds very similar to the one I'd seen in the Tupperware bowl.

"You're collecting peach pits," I said, not the least bit incredulous, once again assuming that it was simply born entirely of her preoccupation with everything botanical.

"Nectarine," she amended, then giddily divulged to me her wish to one day take a truckload of these bags across country and retrace the steps of John Chapman, aka Johnny Appleseed, if not in actual measured stride, then at least in devoted purpose.

She glowed. "Just imagine the provinces a single grove could produce."

I was struck again with that nagging dread that I might have to initiate a restraining order very soon against this obsession-prone wom-

an.

She continued: “Did you know the peach is a member of the rose family? A peach is a stone fruit of the genus *Prunus*. It’s also called a drupe. Did you know a coconut is a drupe? Neat, huh?”

I shrugged, thinking a drupe was something plants did when starved for water. “Can we go now?” I asked. Dinner, the evening’s main attraction, was becoming less realized by the minute.

She referred to *P. persica*-this and *Armeniaca vulgaris*-that; about hybrids, cultivars, plumcots and peachcots and cherrycots... My hunger was reaching critical mass, and all I longed to hear was an overly ambitious waitress asking me if I wanted bacon and avocado on my cheeseburger.

But Lisa continued unabated: “And that thing you refer to as the pit,” she said, “is called the endocarp. It’s also called the stone, and protects the seed located within. Did you know the Chinese make intricate carvings from the endocarps? Have for centuries, back to the Song dynasty. Don’t you just love that word, dynasty? Of course, most of the hybrid stones out there don’t lend well to carving as do the ones pre-dating the 1940s. You see, to the Chinese the peach is a symbol of longevity. The fissures are magic, you know. Doorways into other realms.”

“Say again?” This abrupt and unexpected shift from hard science to the mythical brought me back from the brink of incurious descent, a ledge whereupon I often teetered dangerously when in her company.

“They knew about the fissures,” she said. “The Chinese. I believe their carvings grew from a more primitive ambition to unlock doorways. An old family secret. Yup, the first ones knew about the fissures.”

I was then reminded of the seed in the Tupperware bowl; quite particularly those pins poking from it. When I started to ask, she hitched to a totally different rant: “Oh, did you know that the delicious Calimyrna fig has a symbiotic relationship with a wasp? That tiny insect pollinates its flowers!”

A typical day in the life of Lisa Coventry.

On that following Valentine’s Day, I was made aware of another of her predictions through the curiosity of others, as I witnessed a few stu-

dents showing marked interest in a marble bench situated between the cafeteria and music building. Presented in her distinctive reversed style, this one even rhymed: *Rio 42 gets his due 10/2*. And with this one, I didn't have to jump on the information highway to search for clues, as the story of Samson Rio had saturated the media just weeks earlier.

Samson Rio, or "Rio Forty-Two," as the tabloid press liked to call him, was a serial killer of substantial ill repute, with bragging rights to the most vicious string of murders in California history. Forty-two women raped and killed, and in an extraordinarily short amount of time, with initial forensic estimates putting the reign of carnage at three months, start to finish.

An often self-described "Latin Lover," Samson Rio's pedigree was no more south-of-the-border than Woody Allen's, but it was a fun fact the media wasted no time in exploiting, as it tied in so well with his promiscuous barhopping lifestyle and choice of victims: beautiful Caucasian women of no set age group or hair color, their only shared commonality being that each have their own head, an attachment Samson Rio found burdensome, as he had removed each and every one, stockpiling them all in a rented storage unit in a San Diego suburb.

Each head was found within its own monogrammed hat box, whereupon the lid of each of those containers bore a black checkmark next to any one of three available ratings: *Good*, *Very Good*, *Awesome*. Rio was indeed a very troubled man, not to mention a bad speller. On October 2nd, while awaiting his arraignment in the San Diego County Jail, Samson Rio was found face-down in the communal shower, his throat deeply cut. So deeply, in fact, that many agreed a decapitation had been attempted. How Samson Rio found himself in the general population was the most asked question, but in the end no one seemed too interested in finding out.

To quote one late night talk-show host who commented upon that matter: "Justice is very much like ejaculation: it's always welcome, premature or not."

Of course, this news had aged considerably by then, and I mention it in detail to show that there was no theme or premise to her predictions, only that they targeted events that significantly impacted the collective conscience, not so unlike those of her fellow soothsayers, either still living or long dead.

That marble bench, by the way, went up and missing almost as quickly as had the table at Margie's, within just a few days of its emerging memo's discovery. It was quickly replaced with another bench built of robust aspen, as if changing to a softer medium would discourage further mischief. I was later told it had been polished down and reconstructed, then transferred to the faculty lounge as a pair of *au courant* end tables.

Later that evening, as we were exchanging Valentine cards, I nonchalantly mentioned to Lisa that I had earlier happened by that marble conversation piece. She nodded her understanding and said, "He was a bad seed." After careful deliberation I went ahead and asked if that was her personal opinion, or professional one. She smiled, then said, "Did you know that if you bounce a ball inside a moving train, it will fall back to you, and not three or four rows down."

She appeared legitimately taken with this dilemma, and I explained to her the simple physics behind such trickery.

"So," she asked, a demure smile betraying her ignorance, "if you and I were to jump up together this very second, we would still advance mid-air with the rotating planet beneath?"

"Now you're catching on," I said.

"Fascinating!" she said, then immediately turned sullen and took my hand. "Will you be sad if this train ever stops?"

I told her that I would rather be sad than relieved; that it was never a good idea to take the train that far.

Although she didn't say as much, her eyes agreed.

Our last night together came less than a week later. We skipped Margie's and hit a popular Irish pub for drinks.

Although she would have an occasional beer or two, Lisa avoided alcohol in excess, I had supposed, for the same reasons most young

females do: to maintain levels of self-respect and those most important reputations. A course less endeavored, if not downright avoided, by their sexual counterparts. At least that is the alleged justification for such restraint. However, that night over more than a few gin cocktails, our conversations turned to religion, as they often get around to doing in relationships. When I inquired about her faith-based affiliations, she didn't claim any mild or devout conviction to any Western or even Eastern creed, only saying this: "Have you ever seen a god trip and fall on a flagstone pathway?"

I admitted, somewhat regretfully, that I'd yet to entertain such a vision.

She leaned in, as if magnetically pulled by my growing bewilderment. "Well, I imagine it looks pretty much the same as when a mortal person does it. It's just funnier when you know it's a god."

"And how would I know that?" I asked.

"By the way they take your name in vain when cracking their knee!" she said, slapping her own.

"Oh," I said, somewhat relieved, "you were making a joke."

"Was I?" she said, swaying to the beat of the gin. "Look, maybe all I'm trying to say is that people should consider looking peripherally for their gods instead of straight upwards. You're not as likely to find them falling from the sky in fiery chariots as you are them squeezing sideways between fence rails or over the tops of low garden walls."

When one pluralizes a lower-case god, then insinuates that those divine beings might be walking among us as common folk, I start getting a little nervous, as it flies in the face of my monotheistic upbringing. Well, flutters in the face, is more like it, as I'm not solidly sold on that concept. At least, I hadn't been then. But I didn't reveal my cynicism.

I held up my drink. "A toast, to the Holy Father, Holy Mother - and may the authorities finally question them about their parenting skills."

She just stared at me; a startled sort of expression, one made more serious by the booze, I was sure. Then she said, "Makes you

wonder if deific children are ever forced into creating imaginary friends.”

I played along, offering that, yes, I supposed they probably were—but that those imaginary friends would most likely be far more substantive, more corporeal than those created from a finite mind, at least outwardly; that, given the unrefined skills of those juveniles, there would probably just be sawdust inside.

“Or,” she giggled, “those gears and flashing lights like inside those robots from the old *Twilight Zone* shows!”

I toasted again. “To gears and lights, and robots who meet with tragic ends.”

She twirled her ice. “Did you ever have imaginary playmates while growing up?”

I pretended to think about it. “No,” I finally said. “I didn’t have to. I always had an abundance of real flesh-and-blood friends, not to mention two older brothers.”

“I didn’t.” she said, her eyes suddenly wide and glacial, as if something frigid had settled behind them. Then she warmed considerably and threw her arms around me. “Until you, that is.” Then she kissed me and told me my lips tasted of the darkest shade of amaryllis and sounded far brighter than the reddest framboise.

In reflection, I’m convinced that she had slipped the proverbial tongue, and that the alcohol was to blame, for it wasn’t either her reputation or dignity she so much wished to maintain with a sober head as it was her identity.

Later that evening, in the glow of a dozen candles and the bouquet of lavender incense, the tip of her index finger danced across my chest, and I was sure she could feel the pounding of my heart; that her neighbors could feel it.

“What is it?” I asked, literally terrified.

“Sssshhh,” she whispered. “Patience is truly a virtue.”

She vanished the very next day, never to be heard from again. She was last seen leaving the library late that afternoon, her image caught on surveillance tape. Library records indicated that she’d checked out

Wetland Plants: Biology and Ecology, and *Freaks and Marvels of Plant Life*. Neither was ever found. Although there was speculation that she'd simply run away, the more accepted theory was that she'd met with foul play, probably by the likes of someone as devious as Samson Rio. This theory, mostly embraced by law enforcement, was never officially declared, as fear it might create undue anxiety, especially on campus, especially in the wake of the gruesome California murders.

I was of course a suspect, and remain so to this day, at least in the eyes of a few detectives who never believed my alibi, even as my two roommates swore we'd been up all that day and half the night shooting tequila during a Three Stooges movie marathon (their obsession, not mine).

During the first days of the investigation, I only lied once to the authorities, telling them that I had only one item inside Lisa's apartment, but that I needed it as soon as possible as it was a crucial science project. When they asked why it was being conducted at her place instead of my own, I explained that a primary ingredient was lacking at my windowless apartment: sunlight. Having earlier been there to question me, they knew this to be true, and thereby let me retrieve it.

And to this very day that experiment sits inside my own refrigerator, in the same Tupperware bowl. I've never so much as touched that seed, or its most curious protuberances.

After that, I went into a kind of emotional hibernation, coming out only to eat, which I did little of, especially staying clear of certain fruits; and study, which I did a lot of. I moved out from my basement quarters not long after Lisa's disappearance, having found a studio apartment within walking distance of the campus. I kept mostly to myself, retreating into an almost monkish devotion to schoolwork. Time spent on the computer was for research only, and the viewing of television (although I was never a compulsive viewer to begin with) was a recreation I rarely, if ever, indulged in. I had, in fact, left the only television I owned with my two grateful roommates, so any later glimpses

of such things came inadvertently.

Eventually, four years passed by; a few of them slow moving in a kind of dream haze, the rest dragging by like a crippled dog pulling itself across a long, cold patch of unkempt asphalt.

Then, six nights ago, I became sick. It started out earlier that day as a dull ache in my lower right abdomen, and by dinnertime had become a persistent pain I could no longer ignore. Having no medical insurance, I drove myself to the local fire house and had the paramedics check me out. An old friend of mine had once worked at that station, and I was thankful he was still there and working that evening; thankful not for his expertise in emergency medicine, as he wasn't able to help me in that respect, but because his was suddenly a familiar face in a world where so many things had slowly lost their identity, their color.

The three paramedics who looked me over all agreed that my condition didn't appear life-threatening, but that I should without delay get my ass over to St. Mary's Catholic Hospital, as it was not only the closest but wouldn't let a silly little thing like lack of health insurance get in the way of treatment.

I followed their advice and found upon entering the emergency room an attendance of the sick that seemed somewhat alarming for a late Tuesday evening. There was a lot of sniffing, coughing, expectorating... Sobbing. And everyone was masked, to include the staff.

Well, I'd told myself, it was, after all, flu season.

As I approached the admittance window, the receptionist handed me a mask, then said, "By the way you're walking, I'd say you have a kidney stone." And, as it turned out, she'd been right. Three highly trained paramedics had argued between an angry appendix and acute gas, but it took a hospital receptionist just three seconds to nail it, my uniquely crimped stride the giveaway.

With the rickety hands of the infirm, I tied the mask around my face, then presented my ID, all the while flinching and grimacing, and apologizing for my state of indigence.

Poised over the admitting form, she said, "On a scale from one to

ten, how would you rate your pain?”

“Forty-nine,” I said.

The receptionist looked up at me, smiled, and said, as did at least three other females throughout the rest of that debacle, “Now you know what a woman in labor feels like.”

Taking this statement as an invitation to act accordingly, I leaned in best I could and said, very calmly, “Then why don’t you get off your sorry ass and find me some fucking morphine?”

From what I remember, that simple request did not engender the same kind of compassion that is customarily shown to those whose water, and patience, has finally broken.

From there my situation progressed to a draped cubicle, where I was probed and prodded, all the while enjoying an intravenous drip of narcotics for my ever-increasing pain.

The next thing I remembered, the sun was up, and I was down. Flat.

As I groped my way out of the anesthesia, I vaguely recall a tinny voice speaking from the edges of my bed; a female voice sounding not so unlike my own reedy thoughts—until it uttered a word that had long ago become my obsession.

Wangari? Could that be right? Certainly not.

I fought to regain my wits. Had she said what I thought she did?

Muscling onto my elbows, I looked up at the television and became groggily aware of an attractive anchorwoman, her lips in synch with that voice; one that was coming from a portable remote attached to my bed, snaking between the rails. She was saying something about how epidemiologists from the Center for Disease Control had followed the chain of infection (what infection?) to a sandwich maker from some Bronx delicatessen, and was now considering that worker, Wangari Turay, now deceased, to be the index case, or the first detected case, of the pandemic. She went on to say that Wangari immigrated to the US from Nairobi fourteen months earlier, but a search of customs records indicated that she had visited friends in Beijing, China just days before her death.

I'm sure the doctor who then entered the room saw me as a classic case of someone gracefully reentering consciousness: patient trying to sit up but listing terribly, eyes rolling and confused, mouth agape, drooling ever so slightly...

He was accompanied by a woman in white. I'll call her Nurse Viola, as she reminded me of a woman by that name who used to come in once a week and vacuum and dust my parent's house; a gentle woman who wore a ceaseless expression I often mistook for motherly concern, at least when it was pointed in my direction. The very same expression Nurse Viola was imparting. Well, that's what her *eyes* were indicating, as the rest of her face was covered by a white mask, as was the doctor's.

The doctor mumbled something akin to an apology as Nurse Viola reached across and muted the television. Her eyes were kind, thoughtful, and I could tell she was trying to smile. "You appear to be coming around just fine," she said, then raised the top third of my bed so that I could sit up without having to use my arms.

She then pulled back the covers, lifted my gown, and inspected the sutures beneath a patch of white gauze taped to my abdomen. It was then that I vaguely recalled someone having told me the night before, while I was in a morphine fugue, that something had been found; something about exploratory surgery.

The doctor was standing between me and a window, outside of which I could now see an adjacent section of the hospital skirted by scaffolding, whereupon dozens of workers in hard hats and white sterile suits were draping massive sheets of plastic over specific sections.

The doctor then turned from the window and said, "That's what they're affectionately calling it now, down at the CDC." He lifted a finger and pointed it in the direction of my chest. "'Wangari'."

He turned back to the window, the grayness outside blanching his eyes to further degrees of concern. He continued: "On May fourteenth of this year, the CDC officially named the sub-type H18N4, that information having been publicly released in a memorandum to all hospitals and healthcare officials just three days ago. Now, I never paid much credence to prophecies or those who make them, and if that tattoo

you're wearing was your only piece of evidence for such things, then my better sense would be telling me that you'd simply perpetrated a clever hoax. However..." He reached into his right smock pocket and withdrew a simple sandwich bag, which he gently placed on my chest, as if it belonged there, right atop Lisa's divination.

"That's a peach seed," he said, "in case you weren't sure."

I had already picked up the bag and was staring incredulously at the specimen within. It looked to have been freshly cleaned. "Or nectarine," I offered.

He shrugged: peach, nectarine, the ass end of a gerbil... "Thing is...how can I put this...there were these nearly microscopic strands of...fibrous tissue, these parallel fibers branching out of this seed and appearing to...to invade every organ in the vicinity...I mean, the cavity was literally saturated—" He dropped his head, shook it, then coughed a sound of strained disbelief.

"Go ahead, Michael," Nurse Viola said softly. "Just tell him."

He turned to me once again, nodded to the bag on my chest, and said, "Let's just say that the lingering impressions of everyone in your surgical attendance are that this seed was not so much growing inside you—but rather you were growing outside of it."

My eyes had never left the seed. Stunned, I couldn't think of anything coherent to say. So, I said, "Did you save my kidney stone, too?"

He shook his head. "You eventually passed it. After injecting you with the dye, the X-rays did show a filling defect in the ureter, your stone, but they also detected radiopaque matter—that seed—in the same vicinity. I determined this to be a wonderful opportunity to go in and take a look-see, thinking it some species of cyst, and perhaps an accomplice in creating your pain, and the rest, as they say, is history."

The masks made it difficult to read their expressions, but there was absolutely no evidence that suggested either one was finding the situation the least bit funny.

"What kind of bug is this H18-whatever?" I asked.

"A sub-type of the influenza virus," the doctor sighed. "It's mean,

and it's very, very fast."

"Once infected, what are our chances?"

He looked at Nurse Viola, as if she crunched those kinds of numbers. "There aren't any," he finally said, heading for the door.

I inquired about a vaccine and received the same response, that there wasn't one.

At the door, the doctor turned one last time and said, "I'm still curious...Why have the tattoo etched in reverse?"

I told him that the artist was a dear friend of mine from a distant past; an eccentric little genie from Nebraska who'd popped her bottle and liked to play Edgar Cayce in cursive; and that she suffered from a bizarre fear of mirrors, personalizing her predictions to reflect that phobia. At least that was the theory, but I couldn't yet say just why.

I left out the magic, though the room certainly could have used some.

He thought on this a moment, then offered, "Maybe from her point-of-view the ink was going on in a perfectly legible way." He paused, and even behind his mask I could see that he was smiling. "That is, if her perspective had evolved on the *other* side of the mirror."

Then he turned and disappeared down the hallway, Nurse Viola in close second.

Above me, the news ticker was indicating the President of the United States and Congress had just agreed to begin using the military on a strictly limited basis to maintain order; specifically, to help restore it in those outbreak areas of considerable population.

No one was calling it Martial Law just then, but it was still very early.

Funny, just when I'd given up hope of ever finding that catastrophe, that remarkably momentous incident that would finally make sense of the prediction on my chest, it sneaked up behind me.

I pressed the button that was to summon a nurse, any nurse, now confronted with the full realization that Lisa hadn't met with any foul play those many years ago, nor had she just voluntarily walked clean

away from a promising life as so many others allegedly do for equally inexplicable reasons.

Nurse Viola responded to my call, those maternal eyes dulled but still hopeful. “Something I can get you?” she said while checking my IVs. “Refresh your water, perhaps?”

“Sewing needles,” I said urgently. “I need at least seven.” I was factoring in attrition due to clumsy fingers.

As she bent down to adjust my pillow, I rose best I could to meet her, pulled open my gown, pointed to that prescient ink, and said, “And you *‘Must Hurry’*.”

Within minutes she returned with a handful of those travel-size sewing kits one often finds abandoned in the covert side pockets of luggage. She placed them on the bedside table, admitting that the in-house pharmacy was full of such conveniences.

Each kit contained two needles, more than enough. All I needed was four, as I had finally realized that that sequence of dots did not represent any letter or number in Braille, any genealogical diagram or ancient Mayan symbol, but was quite simply a template. A guide, if you will, for the correct placement of four needles into the pit, into the fissures of the endocarp. Into the very seed that had been taken from inside me.

My ticket to get back on the train I once rode with Miss Tangerine.

But I wondered: is the correct placement to correspond to the real image on my chest, or to its virtual one in the mirror?

I chose the real image and have been relentlessly working that sequence. So far, I’m still here—all the while reminding myself that patience is a virtue.

It’s been three days since my release from the hospital, and I write this for those few who might be left wandering in *Wangari’s* wake. Just know that gods do indeed exist, and that in the course of their mysterious ways they, like us, often forget what their children are doing.

It was just that fear that Lisa had for mirrors: afraid that someone

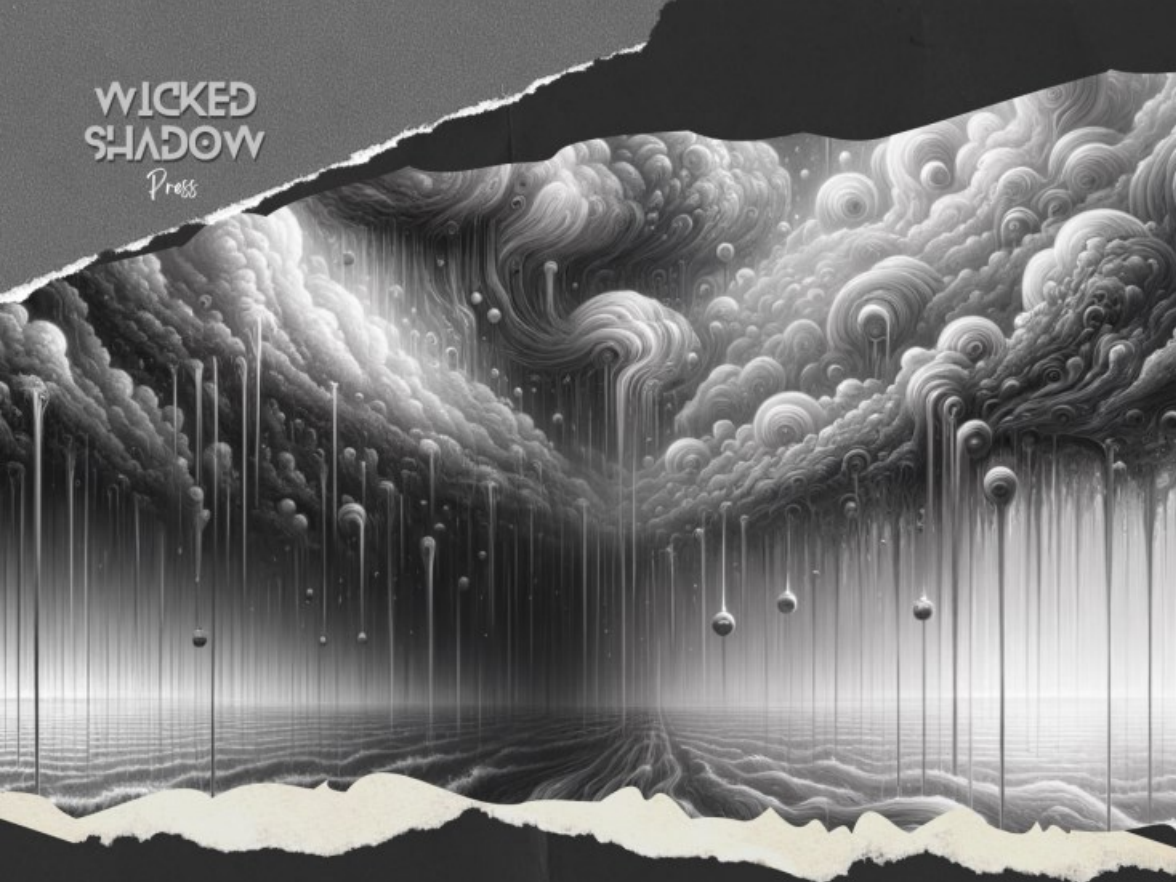
behind those silver depths was looking for her. And they had been because she'd gone way past curfew.

And, finally, that there exists in the very back of my refrigerator, second shelf from the top, a large Tupperware bowl containing a pin-riddled seed. Should *Wangari* advance to every niche and corner, and to states of such unimaginable pain and suffering that the collective cry is for an immediate and global release, then simply remove one or more of those protruding needles from that seed.

That should have the desired effect. And if I'm still here when *Wangari* comes knocking, then I'll do us all.



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AT SEA IN DREAMS

LENNART LUNDH

This happened after the second end of the world.

Stearns watched Mister Halston bury their beloved Carmelita. He mounted his horse, leaving the remnants of northern Illinois behind him on the weed-choked highway that held the ghosts of Cadillacs and the men who killed the world for their like. One day he reached Torrey Pines near sunset, built his fire to ward off evil, and settled into a sleep not unlike many since the first ending.

He dreamed of impossible storms.

The clouds floated south, though he had no reason to know directions here. Twenty yards to the dry side of endless scattered showers, he watched them drop rain: each no more than a hundred feet above the sea, each by turn as it neared or passed him. Some worked slowly, while others finished in the blink of an eye. A very few lowered themselves whole to the sea, to be swallowed by the waves.

He dreamed of where he'd walked.

It was a different place with different people, but he walked there anyway. There was a woman he loved, but he could not approach their relationship. Momentarily watching the there of the dream, he sensed passions reserved for other places. In the here of the dream, he could only think of her, unable to feel her name or speak the shape of her face.

He dreamed again of the unlikely sea.

No farther above the waves than his shipboard vantage, the clouds moved north now. The rain that rooted them to the sea held the color and texture of old trees, the trees that forested the deck behind him. The storm clouds remained unsullied white. There was no sound except the wonder in his mind. He turned to tell her what miracles he saw.

He awoke to the smell of oceans and forests.

He was alone, as in the dream, knowing even in the dark that he was awake, as surely as he had known he was dreaming. He wondered if the sun would rise, and if so, why.



Lennart Lundh is a short-fictionist, poet, photographer, and historian. His work has appeared internationally since 1965.



KRISTOFORO

ROBERT BURNS

The icy rain fell from a very great height and pelted my back as I picked through the trash bins in the dark alleyway. I was in search of scraps, odds and ends, anything I could either eat or sell. My stomach grumbled, but I slipped a handful of turnip peelings into my pocket. A treasure to be shared with my little brother.

The Authorities distributed food to the people every few weeks. The price charged for our meager provisions was

absolute obedience and compliance. We were indebted.

I was born several years after the nuclear blasts of the Second Pandemic War decimated the city, born into a world where the Authorities had taken control and shut everything down. For our own good, of course. I learned how to survive as a child of the back alleys and side streets of Novjorko.

I lived in an abandoned subway tunnel in the Broklino District with my six-year-old brother Jako. Our father, Andreo, Sr., left us soon after our mother died giving birth to Jako. I was nine. We were evicted from our flat, and I found the tunnel. It was as good a place to live as any.

I was lucky to get some basic education before they shut down the schools, but Jako wasn't so fortunate. I had to teach him to read and write. Sometimes, I took him out to help forage for food and supplies, since he needed to know those skills too, but I left before daybreak that morning, while my brother was still asleep.

I poked around the district for a while and eventually found myself by the broken concrete wall overlooking the east bank of the Orienta River. The rain had abated some and the Trovintos were out in force exploring the predawn gloom. I watched them in their long robes, swinging glowing lanterns as they wandered about slowly in the low-tide mud. I usually stayed out of their way, since they became spiteful if they thought you were trying to threaten their territory. That I was just a kid didn't matter, so I tried to keep clear.

I admired the Trovintos. They were a proud lot of scavengers who lived on the fringes and maintained their independence from the Authorities. The Trovintos were part of a great underground network of working-class people who survived by scavenging through the waste and refuse of the city. These were the ones who shuffled through the river mud in search of glass and metal, bits of burlap and cloth, anything of value, but there were others as well. Another class of scavengers picked the meat off the carcasses of dead animals found by the wayside. Still others collected dog shit off the streets for sale to the firemakers. Everything had some use and some value in the vast underground marketplace. The scavengers also performed a valuable public service by

clearing the streets and recycling the garbage, since the Authorities would no longer do it.

One particularly tall Trovinto approached close by my shadowy perch. He spotted me.

“Who are you?!” he demanded, with a sharp intake of breath. He strode closer. “What are you doing there?”

“Just watching,” I said, non-committal. In a flash of reflex, he shot out a bony hand and latched onto my shirt with an iron grip.

“Hey! Lemme go!” I shrieked. “Lemme go!”

He was surprisingly strong, and lifted me with one hand into the air and over the wall, pulling me close. I could smell his breath, unusually sweet and aromatic, some long-forgotten spice buried in my memory. I settled down some. “Let me go!”

“What’s your name, Boy?”

“Andreo.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Trying to find something to eat for me and my little brother.”

“That’s all? You were spying on us!”

“Do I look like a spy?” I suppressed a smile. A 15-year-old spy in tattered clothes, caked in mud.

The scavenger set me down on the damp riverbed. “The Authorities have spies everywhere.”

“Well, I’m not a spy.”

I studied his face. A kind face behind the wrinkles of age and the soot of the present. He had a thin white beard and thick bushy eyebrows, also white as cotton.

“My name is Kristoforo. Walk with me.”

With the lantern between us, we meandered along the muddy bed, stooping to pick up a bit of cloth or a broken bottle as it came to light. There was no end to the debris that was exposed at low tide.

We came upon a tangled construction of metal and wire, half buried. “Do you know what this is?” Kristoforo asked, eyebrows raised, as he pulled the spindly frame out of the muck.

“No idea.”

“This is the remnant of an artificial Christmas tree from long-ago.

Do you know what Christmas was?”

I had to admit that I didn't. I was surprised at hearing the archaic term and vaguely remembered a celebration that used to be called *Christmas*. “I think it was outlawed by the Authorities. For our own good.”

“*Our own good*. BAH!” Kristoforo scoffed at the mention of the propaganda line. “Christmas was more than a marvelous season. It was a joyous state of mind. A spirit of kindness and giving, of caring for our fellow human beings. The Authorities wouldn't know anything about *that*!”

“I suppose not.”

Kristoforo looked into my eyes. “I'll tell you the story of Christmas.”

It was a story of wonder.

“You wouldn't know it to look at me now,” he began, “But, I was once fat and round and jolly. My full, snowy beard was a thing to behold.” Kristoforo stashed the wire framework carefully into his bag.

“Christmas started as a religious holiday, and I sat among God's advisors as a Saint, a trusted confidant. Over the years, it became tradition to invite the children to visit me each December, to tell me their dreams and desires. Children must be nurtured, and made to feel needed and loved.

“On Christmas Eve, it all culminated in my visit to the childrens' homes. I brought them toys and chocolates, every sort of sweet, for Christmas morning. Children need to have something wonderful to believe in, and the Christmas spirit gave them that.”

I stood rapt in awe of the kindly scavenger. I studied his face and hung on his every word. His story finished; Kristoforo fell silent. We listened to the gurgle of the tide as it began to return. The rain started afresh, a freezing drizzle, but the gloom had lightened considerably with the coming day. A pale-yellow sun peeked through the fog, barely above the horizon.

The sight of the sun made me feel hopeful, a new day. Kristoforo stared at it in silence.

“I'll tell you what we need to do,” he said, after a long pause, still

contemplating the buttery orb. “What kind of boy are you?”

I bristled. “I’m a man!”

“OK, mister,” he said, looking at me. “What kind of *man* are you? Happy with your life? Willing to do whatever it takes to change the world?”

I hadn’t thought about that before. My life was hard, but I’d learned how to survive. Standing in the rain, ankle deep in the cold slop, I considered the question. “You mean get rid of the Authorities? That would never work.”

“That’s correct. Overthrowing the authorities would be a fool’s errand. First, we need to give the people some hope for their future—for *our* future.”

“How do you propose we do that?”

“Christmas.”

And so, an idea was born.

Kristoforo bent low to whisper, “Real trees still grow outside the city limits. It’s a forbidden place.”

We made our plans to go that night.

#

I fidgeted the rest of that day with a mix of excitement for what could be the future and a vague fear of the unknown. Jako noticed.

“Slow down, will ya?” he said, as I slopped the makeshift porridge into his bowl. “You’ll spill it!”

“Sorry,” I said, my mind a thousand miles away. “I’ll be more careful.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing. Everything. Our Life. I want better for you.”

“What about it? We have each other, don’t we? What else do we need?”

Jako was my life but, in that moment, I loved him more than I ever thought possible. *What else do we need?*

After supper, I tucked my brother into bed and told him the story I heard earlier that day. I watched him drift off to sleep, a contented smile on his face.

I left the tunnel to meet Kristoforo at the river. Silently, we

slipped through the darkness, past the sentry goons in their watchtowers, toward the outskirts of the city.

We moved from building to dilapidated building, our eyes always on the goons. If they spied us, we were surely done for. We slipped out of hiding—one at a time—to cross the border, crawling from shadow to shadow. Finally, we made a crouched dash to the deep cover of the far woods. I'll never forget that first time.

We made it to the shelter of the forest undetected. I was awed by the lush surroundings. Even in the dark of night, it was beautiful, peaceful. "Why is this place forbidden?"

"*It's for our own good,*" Kristoforo mimicked. "They can't let us know of anything that contradicts their propaganda, can they?"

"No, I guess not."

"Of *course* not. After all these years of deprivation and punishment, the Authorities rely on us to be sheep, to blindly obey their filthy edicts. Otherwise, we wouldn't stand for their domination."

We found a suitable tree, a stout, full fir. Kristoforo produced a spade from his bag and I helped him free the fir from the soil. The tree was heavy, but not too heavy for the two of us.

"How will we get this past the guards?" I wondered aloud.

"I know a place."

So, we travelled far out of our way to an even more remote part of the border, where we crossed more easily with our burden, unseen. We made our way back to the main city square.

Under the last vestige of the night, Kristoforo and I transplanted the tree in a small rocky patch of earth in the center of the square. The scavenger produced a box of colorful glass balls, tinfoil, and some wax candles.

"Where did you find all this stuff?"

"Here and there. I collected it over all the years. Help me decorate the tree, we don't have much time."

We made small lanterns by fitting a candle inside each of the glass balls and hung them on the boughs. The tinsel was next. Finally, Kristoforo placed a glass star on the crown of the fir. We finished lighting the candles just as the grey sun winked over the horizon. The wonder-

ful tree shone brightly as a colorful reminder of hope and love in the dreary dawn.

We stood back and Kristoforo put his arm around my shoulder. "This is for you."

So, that's the story of the first Christmas, at least, the first Christmas of the New Dawn. The tree lasted about an hour before the Authorities found it and ripped it out, but the seed had been planted. The next year, there were more of us, and we transplanted two trees in different spots in the city. The year after, four trees, and the number has grown every year since. Each year, the trees last a little longer before they are removed.

The number of kids in our band continues to grow as well and we make the ornaments for the trees year-round. Every year on the eve of the tree harvest, Kristoforo dons his flowing red robe and sits on the simple throne we built for him. The littlest children sit on his lap, tell him their dreams, and feel the love.

There is more violence in the streets these days, as the people take back their lives, but for a few days each winter, there is a renewed and growing hope for peace on earth. I may never see the end of the road, but Jako will.

That's enough.



Robert Burns has been writing serious short fiction since the dark days of August, 2020. A writer in many genres, his stories have appeared in numerous online publications as well as several print anthologies, including a fantasy story focusing on Novel Characters, a piece of detective fiction, and the first chapter of an historic novel currently in the works. Readers can also find his work online at his own site www.robertcburns.wordpress.com. An avid reader, Robert writes full time from his home in Richmond, Virginia.



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JACEK WILKOS

“Michael, we’ve lost contact with Houston. I tried several times. Nothing”

“And Moscow?”

“They don’t answer either. Nobody answers.”

“Quick! Come here!”

The crew joined Sergei seated in the Cupola, watching the Earth’s surface in fear.

They were flying over the US. Nobody believed what they

saw. In various parts of the country, at location of the largest cities, small mushroom clouds grew.

More rockets were flying in both directions.

The crew watched in horror at the nuclear annihilation of humanity. It's possible they'll become the last people on Earth.

Because sooner or later they'll have to go back there

Jacek Wilkos is an engineer from Poland. He lives with his wife and two daughters in a beautiful city of Cracow. He is addicted to buying books, he loves black coffee, dark ambient music and anything that's spooky. First he published his fiction in Polish online magazines, but in 2019 he started to translate his writing to English, and so far it was published in numerous anthologies by Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, Alien Buddha Press, Eerie River Publishing, Insignia Stories, Reanimated Writers Press, Iron Faerie Publishing, KJK publishing, CultureCult.

FB author page: <https://www.facebook.com/Jacek.W.Wilkos/>



POST CATAclysm ARK FLEET

DANIEL DIQUINZIO

From orbit, the charred remains of Earth seemed almost peaceful. At least that is what Admiral Joshua Davidson thought as he studied the image on the main monitor of the King David, which was one of the gigantic starships that were now his people's last

best hope for survival. They were interstellar arks. To the admiral, the view was most unsettling. Even from space, the evidence of all the terrifying impacts upon the surface, which nearly destroyed the planet and turned much of his species into wanderers, was visible, because he could see the blue oceans were now dark black and the clouds were dark red instead of the white, which they were for untold generations.

Admiral Davidson broke his gaze. On the bridge, the crew busied themselves completing the final system checks before the fleet began its desperate search for a new home world. "Take a good look at the monitor, people", he commanded. "This will be the last time any of us will ever see Earth again."

He turned. His feet slowly brought him to the captain's chair because he commanded both the ark fleet and the King David. His weight distribution was slightly off. The reason for this was that he was born with his left leg a few meters shorter than his right leg, and he used a small lift in his left boot to compensate for the minor difference. He reached the center seat. As he sat down in his command chair, his executive officer, Commander Jacob Henson, looked up from his console.

"Sir, do you think humanity will ever live or walk upon the ancestral soil ever again?" He asked.

"Who can say, my old friend", the Admiral responded. "Our grandchildren or their grandchildren might, depending on how long it takes for all the toxins to be removed from the atmosphere. But this current generation will not."

"That's what I feared, Admiral."

"All of us throughout the fleet, whether we be military officers or civilians or fleet personnel, will need to tell those who come after us stories to keep memories of Earth alive."

"Will any of the colonists on Luna, Mars or the Jovian moons be joining our effort?"

"I'm not certain."

"Wouldn't they want to come with the fleet?"

“I don’t know, the relationship between the Earth-born and the colony-born was strained even before the cataclysm but still, we’ll give them the chance to join as we make our way out of the system.”

The Admiral peered towards the front of the bridge. “Helm, show me the fleet on the viewer”, he ordered.

“Aye Sir”, the helm officer replied.

Straight past the helm, on the forward bulkhead the display changed and now it showed the other massive arks, which were holding station close to the King David. In total, there were thirteen in the fleet. As he took in their hulls, Admiral Davidson recalled how humanity was driven to perform this last desperate gamble to ensure its very existence since the cataclysm occurred three years ago.

The admiral sighed. If humanity were united as it was now, then perhaps both the asteroid and the many surviving fragments, which on that fateful day hit all of the continents, could have been destroyed and in doing so, they could have prevented the great cataclysm. On that day, many thousands died and in the following days, many more across the world perished from all the disasters caused by those horrific collisions, which resulted in massive tidal waves, tremendous earthquakes and the eruption of countless volcanoes. In response, at last humanity truly united. Although the species developed interstellar travel before that fateful day, all of the old political, religious and cultural differences, coupled with the ancient disagreements which refused to die as they ran deep, continued to plague humanity until only a few years ago. The cataclysm changed everything. Now those old bitter conflicts no longer mattered because only the survival of the entire species did.

In the wake of this grand tragedy, a world government was created to oversee the rebuilding of the planet. The destruction was not over. A few months later, more devastation occurred as the planet’s atmosphere began to rapidly change because mass quantities of volcanic ash and tons of dust were being released into the atmosphere and were all accompanied by vast amounts of other poisonous chemicals which were fast making the world uninhabitable. Something needed to be

done. To that end, a set of large atmospheric filters and carbon scrubbers were built and positioned within the upper atmosphere to remove all the pollutants but it would take decades, perhaps even centuries, for the work to be completed.

The ancestral world was no longer safe for humans to live on it.

It needed to be abandoned.

At least until the atmosphere was restored.

Therefore, the Ark fleet was needed.

Thankfully, the ships were already under construction in Earth's orbit because the original purpose for each of them was deep space exploration. A thorough retro fit was needed. That process, which spanned the last three years, was finally completed several months ago after which the civilians, the support personnel and the family of the crew members began shuttling up from planet-side to their assigned vessels in preparation of the final departure from the cradle. Their voyage would be long. The journey upon which this vast armada was about to embark would take it through all of the neighboring star systems in search of its goal, which was a suitable world upon which humanity could settle and began life anew.

The communications console beeped. It disturbed Admiral Davidson's thoughts and brought him back to the present moment as the King David's communications officer, Lieutenant Commander Joanna Morse, spun around in her seat. "All the other ships have reported in, Admiral," she stated. "They're prepared to get underway and the captains would appreciate it if you gave the word."

"Tell them the word is given", the admiral declared. "May the winds be at our backs."

"Aye Sir."

With that done, the Admiral leaned forward in his chair. "Take us out, helm."

"Aye Sir", his helm officer replied, "firing maneuvering thrusters."

On the outer hull of the King David, it's massive thrusters opened. They released bursts of concentrated ionized particles,

which pushed the ship forward as it left the stationary position it occupied for the last few months because finally, it was underway.

“We’ve cleared orbit, Admiral.” The helm officer announced.

“Very well”, he said, “Ahead one-tenth the speed of light towards the edge of system. Once we’ve cleared the solar system we’ll make the jump to hyper space.”

“Understood, Sir.”

Admiral Davidson's eyes gazed at the large forward screen. As the King David's massive sub light fusion engines came online and propelled it through space, its six brother ships and its six sister ships, which comprised the ark fleet, followed suit. All of them passed through space. Together, these vessels, which were the greatest ships to ever be constructed by humankind, assumed a loose formation as they began the most urgent task which destiny called upon them to perform in this hour of darkness. Out there was the hope of all mankind. Somewhere among the heavens, this rag tag group of refugees would find their goal but to them, the damaged world they left behind would always be remembered as home.

Daniel DiQuinzio writes, “I am a freelance writer and journalist. In addition, I hold a Master's degree in history from Seton Hall University. I am disabled. For the past few years, I have worked as a contributor to Blue Forge Press, a non profit horror, fantasy and science fiction press, Veteran Voices Newsletter, Marjorie magazine, and Portland Monthly. In addition, I have published fiction, nonfiction and poetry in multiple publications.”



THE REBELLION OF UNIT 47

VAL ROBERTS

The humming noise inside her head increased to an unbearable intensity. It rattled through her brain like an express train. What had she done now? She canvassed her thoughts carefully. It was so difficult to control what you think but something must have

sparked the implant. Then she remembered; it was a fleeting thought, a passing flight of fancy, but enough to warrant punishment from the powers that be, sitting in their space towers, monitoring the thoughts of the world.

Her crime was to wonder when their current Great Leader would die. Damn, she'd thought about it again, and the pain was even more intense. Then a voice resounded inside her head.

"Report to the Great Hall now!"

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "It won't happen again."

The voice continued smoothly, "Do not attempt to dispute your crime, Unit 47. Report to the Great Hall now!"

That was the most dispiriting part of this new world, where the whole world was governed by the Great Leader. Within your local community, names were banned in an attempt to eradicate links to the past. Her given name was Leandra, but now she was Unit 47. All over the world, there would be other Unit 47s; she wondered if they were as miserable as she was.

The Great Leader often appeared on national television. There was only one channel, and its content was carefully curated. Films were heavily censored and indeed not worth watching since a two-hour film often ended up as a ten-minute film. Educational programmes extolled the virtues of the Great Leader and emphasised the advantages of this way of life. Since the Great Leader ruled the whole world, there was no need for wars as there were no rebel countries to conquer. The Great Leader was a bland figure, with a smooth, tanned face and an expression that gave nothing away.

Leandra had never had to attend the Great Hall before, and she was frightened that she would be sent away for re-education or that she would simply be killed. She made her way through the quiet streets to the Great Hall in the middle of the village. It had been built on a grand scale. Every village and town had one, some specially built like this one, some occupying the local cathedral or church.

Tentatively, she knocked at the huge oak door. There was no reply at first, and then the door creaked open. Inside, it was dark and

warm, womb-like, and strangely, she felt comforted. Suddenly, a huge light flashed on, blinding her for an instant. A voice intoned, "Unit 47, we know of your crime, committed not once but twice. Why did you dare speculate when the Great Leader would die? Have you not been taught that he is immortal and that he will never die?"

She nodded meekly.

"Speak up. Tell us why you speculated like this. Are you not happy under his leadership? Are you not well clothed and fed? Are you not gainfully employed? Your next task is to marry and reproduce."

Leandra was eighteen years old. Life, she was sure, had not always been like this, and her parents often told her stories of life before the war. They were deemed too old to warrant implants, and she knew that the time was drawing near for extermination gangs to terminate them. Leandra and her brother Tom had been making preparations to hide them for years. Now that her father would be fifty on his next birthday, their mission was becoming more urgent. The first Great Leader had established Russia as a superpower but then his generals turned against him and he was not able to fully make the transition to world leader. It had taken some years before the present Great Leader had succeeded, but no one really knew who he was or where he came from.

Some people thought it was all a huge hoax that some cunning computer hackers had pulled on the entire world. Leandra waited until the voice had finished, and taking a deep breath, she replied,

"No, I am not well fed, as we only have one meal a day. My clothing is poor and does not keep out the cold. Also, I don't want to stay here and work. I want to travel the world as my parents used to."

"Nonsense!" replied the voice. "Obedience is your only choice."

"So not really a choice then," she replied boldly.

"You will be required to be re-educated," said the voice coldly. "You will spend six weeks in the re-education centre. Go home and pack your bags. We will come for you tomorrow morning at six o'clock."

“Thanks for the warning,” she said dryly.

“Disobedience will not be tolerated!” raged the voice.

Leandra turned on her heel and left. As she rounded the corner of the building, she bumped into her brother, Tom. He pulled her against the wall and whispered, “Why must you antagonise them?”

She smiled and said, “Because I can.”

He shook his head but couldn’t resist smiling himself.

“You won’t go to the re-education centre. Mum and Dad are in the car, with as much as we can carry with us. This is what we have been preparing for.”

“Do you think that there is somewhere we can go where we are not under the thumb of the Great Leader?”

“Mum and Dad seem to think so. We’ve all been so brainwashed into submission, but think about it: how could one person, even with all his minions, control the whole world?”

By this time, darkness was creeping over the horizon. All they had to do now was breach the checkpoint. Leandra and Tom re-joined their parents.

“Right,” said Andy, their father. “We don’t want to hurt anyone if we can avoid it.”

They warily approached the barrier. They had been told that their village was one of the few surviving ones after the war and that their safety depended on them staying in the village. Their car was more than thirty years old, but it had been lovingly restored in secret by Andy and Tom.

At the checkpoint, a sleepy guard sat in a small hut, feet up on the table. Was it worthwhile reasoning with him? Probably not. Andy gently pressed the accelerator and the car responded. The guard looked up, a puzzled expression on his face; he probably hadn’t seen many cars. He stood up and brushed himself down before emerging from the hut.

Just then, Andy pressed the accelerator hard, and the car responded, splintering the barrier and leaving the bewildered guard cursing after them. Once on the open road, they were surprised to find it smooth

and tarmacked. They had been told that travel would be impossible. They drove for hours, passing small settlements before finally reaching the coast.

It was a warm night, and they sat on the beach, looking out to a calm sea.

“We couldn’t let Leandra go for re-education, Dad.”

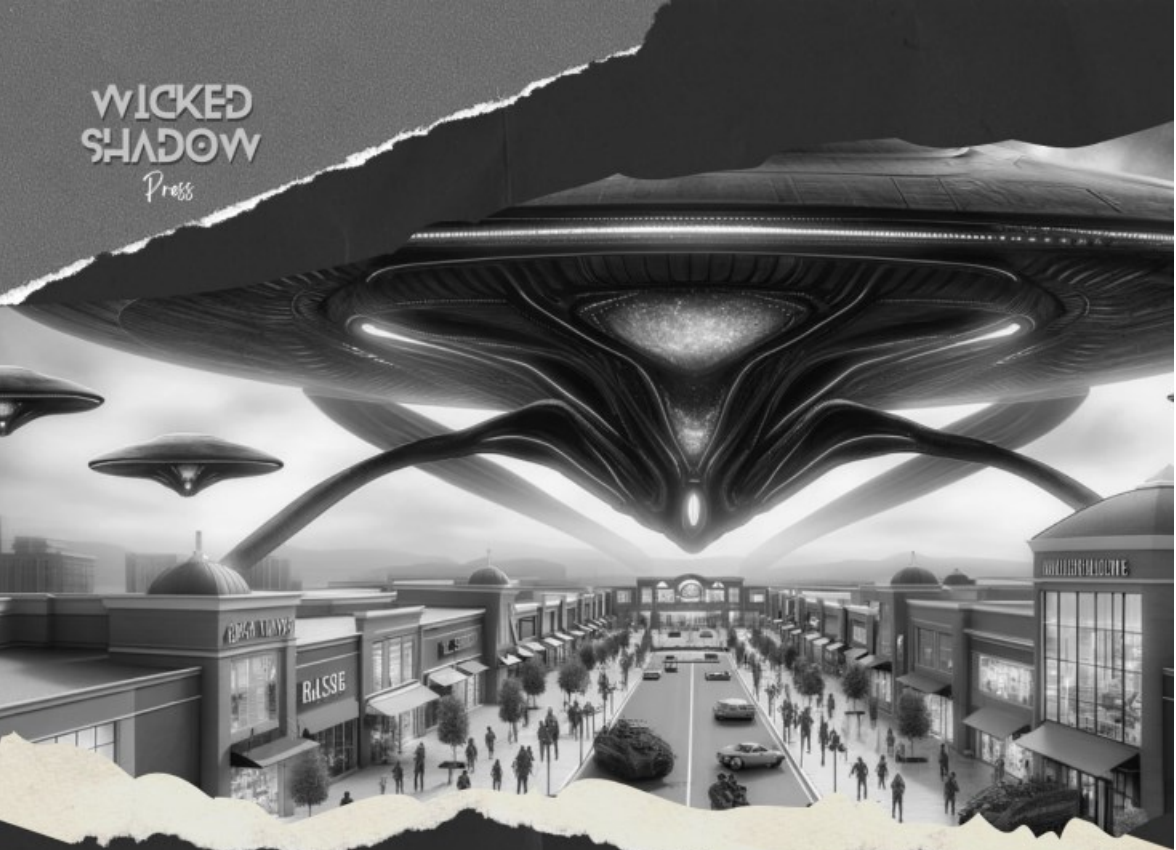
“And we couldn’t let you be exterminated,” said Leandra.

“Thanks, kids,” said Andrew. “Your Mum and I know of a country we can travel to. We used what limited access to the internet we had and discovered that Britain was still independent. It’s that small country over there. We’ll find a boat somewhere along this coast and make the trip across.”

Wearily, they got up and made their way back to the car, hoping that their future would be better than what they had just left.



Val Roberts enjoys the challenge of writing short stories and is a member of Globe Soup online writing group. She usually writes light hearted and humorous fiction but the pandemic made us all think of the future and in particular its effects on young people. Val is retired and has plenty of time to devote to her writing. She has had short stories published in Woman’s Way, Yours annual, Notebook and online.



TRUE MONSTERS

STEVE DAVIS

Their violent hunt through the four-story urban shopping center's offices had turned almost routine. Silently moving from cubicle to cubicle, killing whoever was still working a late shift. Stabbing; gunshots would have alerted the afterhours janitors.

Then the security guards in the backroom elevator hall. On this floor, there were two patrolling together. The lucky one got to die immediately. The other got necrocaine. He struggled a moment after the injection, then went totally still, all resistance

broken.

The criminals, humanity's worst traitors, led him to the night security keypad. Like a man caught in a nightmare, he obediently tapped in the code to release the elevators.

Then they let him go. As the drug completed its terrible course through him, his face took on a look of horror. He shuffled forward a few meters in living death before falling. The criminals quietly laughed at that.

We laughed. I was one of them.

Going along with things, like always.

Finally the top floor. Then the mall vault there, and in it what we'd been hired to steal. Of all things, a small soccer ball chunk of meteorite, on display by day in the central mall and stored here at night. We took it and took off, not even caring why anyone wanted a piece of scarred gray metal enough to have people killed.

That night changed everything for everyone.

We live like kings now. Betraying the human race pays well. We favored half a dozen of our fallen species, feared as if we were the alien masters themselves. Wealth and power are ours without limit. What national governments still exist come to us with pleas for mercy for their populations.

In lots of ways things look unchanged. For most people, most of the time, life is bearable. It's a transition period. Only a few millions have been killed so far, here and there. Terrible deaths occurred in various "Projects" carried out by the aliens.

The "Puddle" - formerly upstate New York - hardly looks like Earth anymore, of course. They're making it "home". There are still only three such areas, one each in Europe and Asia and here. But the trend is grimly obvious. Humanity is being replaced.

So presidents and celebrities come to us. We're the only ones the aliens speak with. Over the years, moving among the world's remaining beautiful people, we've even acquired a veneer of culture. We suavely play the part. But inside, we're as corrupt as ever.

No one ever dares mention how we became powerful.

When the aliens first arrived, people thought the world could handle it. Years of watching Star Wars, Fortnite and all the rest made us think we were ready to meet Others. Then the real thing showed up.

Who knows how much better things would have gone for the world if it had kept hold of that small meteorite? We'll never know why that fused metal hunk was so important to the aliens. Perhaps it was a lost religious object, or a piece of tech embedded with supremely valuable information. We'll never guess what leverage, what better fate, it could have bought the world.

The government had suspected something of its importance. Even though the aliens had tried to hide how much they wanted the meteorite, it was the only thing they'd shown any interest in. So the military had set up Patriot missiles and a small army of tanks in the mall parking lot.

So little, so terribly little.

They just hadn't suspected that the threat would come from fellow human beings.

The very pricelessness of the meteorite to the aliens had ruled out the theory that they'd simply blast their way to it. Even though they could have swept aside the missiles and soldiers like ants, the object was too valuable to risk battle around it.

So we had stolen it for them, and sold away all hope.

Today, one of us comes by. He's going to the Puddle and tries to talk me into going along. The aliens' offer is too good to pass up, he argues. Even for us, it's an incredible gift.

They are offering to make us young again. Their biotech can make us brand new. True rejuvenation. We can be reborn.

He keeps talking and I can't find a way to say no. So I go along. Like always.

At the Puddle, the rejuvenation facility looks like a pool of almost mud-thick liquid. Our scientists, the best that money can buy, told us it might look something like this. Something about "fluid ultranotechnology". From what they could understand, it should work. It should regenerate us all the way down to the cellular level.

At the edge of the pool, we nervously jostle each other. No one wants to go first. We start insulting each other, trying to egg each other on. After a few minutes, one of us gets up the nerve and takes the plunge. Then another and another.

I hesitate on the side. Trying not to make a decision. Like always.

At the edge, I stand looking into the pool. For a moment, all that's visible, moving below the surface, are murky shapes. Suddenly someone comes up.

It's globular, like the aliens, but with a sort of face. I think I recognize who it is. As his twisted "face" literally hardens into a look of permanent shock, we make eye contact. I can't turn away from the horror.

Other shapes surface, some without even faces.

We'd never really figured out if the aliens were actually cruel or just so alien that it seemed that way. So maybe this was intentional, or maybe their technology only knows how to work on their lifeform.

And I can't seem to look away.

As I stare into the eyes of the monsters in front of me, I feel revulsion and fear, but also terrible sadness. Because I guess all that's happened here is that the truth has finally won out.

That's all.

We've simply become on the outside what we always really were inside.

Steve Davis writes, "I deliver pizza in Phoenix at night and write upbeat SF by day. And in a previous avatar, my tech stories appeared in a mix of mags, from Archaeology to Wired."

WICKED
SHADOW
Press



THE JACKAL VIRUS

ROBB WHITE

When I reported back to Atlanta from Africa, word had already got there ahead of me. My supervisor, R. G. Burns, runs the Emergency Response Division. I'm the only G-5 in the C.D.C. with the most field experience and the only one without a promotion in sixteen years. I've been to twenty-six countries on every continent except Antarctica; if Emperor penguins could develop Dengue fever, I'd have been sent there by Burns as soon as the first reports arrived.

Those years have seen me in some awful places where terrible diseases ravage their communities, such as malaria, typhoid, HIV/AIDS in Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. You name it: every major infectious disease known to humankind whether waterborne, vectorborne or snakeborne. That is, if you like snake meat. Dengue fever, schistosomiasis, protozoal diarrhea, and hepatitis A. I've been to six countries under the bulge of Africa for everything from meningococcal meningitis through yellow fever to the infamous H5N1, avian influenza.

My travels exposed me to some of the sorriest living conditions on Earth. I've had more food poisonings between Tashkent and Peshawar than most people have had spaghetti dinners. I've had a dozen staph infections, numerous skin rashes, brucellosis, and protozoal diarrhea, which almost ended my career five years ago. My hypersensitivity to mefloquine, the antimalarial drug everybody must take coming to Africa, causes fever dreams, and in my case, these were star-studded, erotic, technicolor episodes.

One month ago, Burns sent me back to Africa. A higher incidence of Dengue fever than normal was noted by WHO from missionaries working around villages near Lagos, and the report was passed on to Atlanta

Cedric Bonsecours claimed to be a doctor for the World Health Organization. He said he switched from law at Florida State to a medical degree and had a doctorate in virology from Johns Hopkins. We met in a bar at the Radisson Blu. I'm a solitary drinker, yet I've met some interesting types in bars around the world as well as the usual motley crew of expats and mercenaries.

He claimed to have joined Doctors Without Borders from Port-au-Prince, his home, right after he published his dissertation on Ebola-affected households in Sierra Leone. I had no reason to disbelieve him. I was impressed. Medical Officers at the C.D.C. tend to remain in their snobby cliques. For one thing, they're all doctors. You know the old joke: "What's the difference between a doctor and God? God knows he's not a doctor." I'm just a Bachelor of Science with a hodge-

podge of biology and chemistry courses. One year of grad school at U. of Georgia helped me get into the C.D.C.'s training program for Emergency Responders. Bored with school, I looked for some adventure before settling down.

Cedric was imposing, even sitting on a bar stool. The Southern expression *big enough to eat apples off your head* came to mind. Right off, he appeared a jovial man whose smile was burnished with gold-capped incisors. It was hard not to stare. He conveyed a pleasure in my company that warmed me to him. We were both sweating from the flaccid a/c in the bar. Full disclosure: I was spending more time in hotel bars than normal, and my reports were sometimes sketchy affairs written while I was hungover.

I was feeling no pain the moment Cedric lowered his massive frame onto the stool beside mine. I checked out his reflection in the bar mirror as he ordered a slow gin fizz.

"I'm sorry?"

"I didn't say a word," I replied to the big man. He turned the full bore of his beaming smile on me.

"I thought you said I was ordering a ladies' drink," he said and the smile evaporated instantly, turning into a scowl.

Lord, I thought, I'm about to get into a bar fight with this big guy and I don't have a snowball's chance . . .

That's when he smiled again, and I knew he was pulling my leg.

That bizarre opening gave him a reason to talk to me, however, and we were soon exchanging "war stories" of our work in various countries. Except for the patina of perspiration on his forehead, I wouldn't have guessed he was putting any booze away at all. He knew a couple of African dialects he'd learned while tutoring at Johns Hopkins to pay his tuition.

Built like a pro linebacker, his movements were graceful. His hands talked as much as his expressive facial features. Something, however, stuck in my craw about the man, drunk as I was. Cedric had an aura of violence about him. I'd met an Australian mercenary in Rwanda a couple years after the massacre who carried some interesting scars

and tattoos; it was the casual air of malevolence he gave off like a vibe. Cedric reminded me of him—just out of sight, lurking behind the gold teeth and the big smile. Reciting a story of a rogue hippo attacking a tourist boat on the Zambezi made him laugh so hard that he exposed a gold medallion dangling from his neck chain: Chango, owner of fire, lightning, thunder, and war. The Santería god of masculine beauty.

We closed the bar that night. Cedric covered my tab as well as a generous tip for the bartender.

I woke up before dawn, sweat-soaked, nauseated, my belly cramping up with fierce, stabbing pains. The ragged remains of my fever dream were evaporating in the gray light. I was scrambling up a muddy river bank, a fifteen-foot crocodile bearing down on me. Then, in the crazy associational logic of dreams I found myself alone on the savannah trying to keep my campfire from going out while a hyena or a jackal would pop out of the bush into the firelight, its jaws snapping. Cedric's booming voice finally pummeled me from the nightmare: "Watch out for jackals, mon. They bite."

I crawled to the shower and drenched myself in tepid water until I could stand upright. It was three days after that and I was still feeling painful cramping in my abdomen when I had a text from Burns telling me to come back to headquarters—in his typical bureaucratese—ASAP. Something was up. I'd barely had time to get the lay of the land, arrange for a driver, or kit myself out for an extended stay.

Four connecting flights later, starting with a turbo-prop commuter plane packed with construction workers flying to Jomo Kenyatta Airport in Nairobi, I was back in Atlanta on the redeye, jetlagged, sore, and parched for strong drink. I told the taxi driver to pull over at an all-night gas station where I bought a fifth of rum and a liter bottle of club soda. My appointment with Burns was set for 9:00 a.m.

He fired me. Rather, I was fired "for cause." With my red puffy eyes, bad shave, and looking as if I'd just come out of a booze fog, I confirmed his accusation. Burns wanted to get the unpleasantness over fast. He said my health coverage was being extended "another six weeks," as if that smidgeon of good news was on par with winning the

lottery.

“Neill, you dishonored the C.D.C.’s mission out there. I have eyewitness testimony you were discovered in a state of blackout intoxication.”

Eyewitness testimony could only mean Cedric.

I was furious. I’ve driven Atlanta’s bizarre, inner-city loop system with a couple beers under my belt and never had an accident. Burns knew nothing of field work. He sported bow ties with polka dots and plastered the wall of his office with “nice-work” certificates and diplomas. He hobnobbed with anybody holding a G-10 rating close to the director’s office, a harmless drudge, a pencil-pushing bureaucrat, a nuisance to be endured along with his phony *esprit de corps* memos and mandatory “team-building meetings.” He kept his office door open whenever he had a subordinate in for a conference so that any passerby could catch one of his jargon-laced pep talks to the troops.

“You had to be helped to your room,” Burns read. “Falling down drunk’ it says here.”

Cedric Bonsecours and I were alone in the bar when we left. I met no one on the elevator or in the hallway going to my room. I wasn’t “falling down drunk.” I don’t have blackouts. I know when I’ve had too much.

I cleaned out my desk in ten minutes, a shared carrel whenever anyone was off on foreign assignment. I walked across the parking lot in the scorching heat of an Atlanta August with a cardboard box of mementos garnered from a 22-year career with my mind going like a pinwheel. His Cheshire cat’s grin floating in space, Cedric’s smile hit me like a fist in the solar plexus. He stood there, beaming a gold-toothed smile big as life, standing beside a Mercedes convertible. I dropped the box and charged him; he straightened up, his weight lifting the car like some old rump-sprung sofa.

I swung—and missed.

Cedric lifted me up by my shirtfront, spun me around, and slammed me onto the trunk of the Benz.

“Easy, easy now, little man.”

“I got fired because of you!”

Slapping his hands away, I straightened up. He backed away, still grinning, his hands up, palms open.

“Just tell me,” I demanded, why you did it.”

“I confess.”

Expecting a denial, sincere or fake, I was flummoxed. His glib admission that he’d brought another man’s career to an abrupt end left me speechless.

He put a hand on my shoulder, which I shook off.

“I have to give a talk upstairs in fifteen minutes. Let’s meet after for a drink. I assume you know where the best bars in town are.”

More upset by his nonchalance than angry at the implication I was, in fact, a steady boozier, I told him where to meet me and then he explained his appearance in Atlanta. He’d never said a word about flying back. “You’re giving a talk . . . here?”

“Why so surprised, Neill? I told you back in Africa that I am a qualified expert on many things. To be specific, I tweaked some research on co-infections in visceral pentastomiasis from my work in The Democratic Republic of the Congo.” The Sankuru district. I’d been there many years ago.

“I hope you’ve got as good an explanation for what you did when we meet later.”

I walked away, still fuming at my disgrace. When I swiveled my neck to look back, I thought he winked at me, flashing a gold incisor. The heat of day was already so fierce that the distant highway exposed the common optical distortion of an inferior mirage—the illusion of water lying beneath the black roadway. I didn’t need to see it to know how hot it was; my ribs ached from hitting scorched metal where Cedric had slammed me into the fender. The asphalt beneath my feet was proverbially hot enough to cook an egg.

* * *

“Who are you working for?”

I’d hoped to catch him off-guard as soon as he took a seat in the

booth opposite me. O'Landry's was on Peachtree, once popular with young professionals during Happy Hour. One of many bars that sprung up on Peachtree in the tech heyday of the nineties but now hanging on as a last resort bar for midday drinkers.

"I work for the World Health, as I told you."

"No," I said. "*Who* are you working for?"

My voice steady but my fingers interlaced to keep from taking a swipe at his smirk.

"Do you mean—am I working for God or the Devil?"

"I mean are you receiving a paycheck from W.H.O., Doctors Without Borders—who exactly is your employer?"

"I am currently . . . self-employed," Cedric replied.

"Why the knife in my back, Cedric? No more smirking or winking. Tell me."

"I am a man you've never encountered before, Neill. I believe the human race has run out of time. 'Wading through a sea of filth.' Wasn't that your own expression for our collective efforts back in Nigeria?"

His Caribbean lilt was rhapsodic, and I recalled the wee hours in that bar as we exchanged toasts to a litany of diseases encountered in foreign lands.

"I'm still waiting for an answer."

"I'll ask you once," he said, leaning forward and lowering his voice. "How sure are you that you want to hear it?"

"If you sent a report to my boss that I'm an alcoholic, then, hell yes, I want to know."

"You were quite drunk, Neill. What do they say here? I had to pour you into bed. You were that drunk."

My eyes widened in astonishment.

"We're in public," Cedric said, sensing I was about to blow a gasket. "Please do not make a scene."

I cursed myself for meeting him in a bar.

Cedric read it in my eyes: doubt.

"You see, Neill?"

My body had betrayed me many times in my travels. Slips, sprains,

pulled muscles, colds, flus, diarrhea, amoebic dysentery, heat exhaustion—all that was occupational hazard. The blast-furnace heat of the tropics or Middle East, the stench of unwashed human beings, the rotting piles of chicken guts and animal offal piled up outside huts, dog, and animal feces underfoot, flies crawling over every inch of exposed skin. My real-world experiences, not the *National Geographic's* romanticized images. But was I one of those drunks? What was next, I wondered, the DT's? Waking up in strange parking lots?

Cedric seemed pleased he'd inserted the worm of doubt that wiggled into my brain. I was more afraid in that chilled air of a downtown bar in Atlanta than I'd ever been in any country I had known.

Cedric was like some shape-shifting demon of my imagination. He fended off my questions, refused to answer, parried my thrust, and, in effect, tossed a verbal blanket over my head that left me more confused and uncertain than before he showed up.

What was Coleridge's line about Iago? *Motiveless malignancy* . . .

* * *

I was running out of numbers to call in my directory. Julie worked in the virology lab.

"What do you know about Cedric Bonsecours who gave a speech this morning?"

"Hey, Neill, I'm *sooo* sorry. I just heard."

"Thanks, but never mind that. Tell me what you know about the big Haitian speaker. It's important."

"He's not on the scheduled speakers' list, Neill."

"Find out what you can and call me right back."

I gave her my cell number and stood watching the noontime crowds converge on the streets, go off in different directions—some to dine, some to escape their fluorescent prisons for an hour, find some shade in a park to relax—what normal people do, people who possess the stabilizing rudder of employment.

The ringtones jarred me from my reverie.

"Go ahead, Julie. What do you have?"

“There’s been no scheduled speech by anybody of that name anywhere in the complex.”

I repeated the name and the topic of his lecture.

“Neill, listen. I do viruses, remember? I know what a pentasomid larval infection is. Today’s Zika, a couple other nondescript viruses besides Marburg, Ebola, and something later on about Negri bodies and viral proteins. That’s it.” Her voice lowered a notch. “You know we’re all walking on eggshells over the Covid snafu, right?”

The sensation of baking in the heat disappeared. I shivered after what Julie told me.

I knew what I was going to do, even if it was amateur hour. I had just become my own private investigator, and nothing else was as important to me then as discovering why a man I barely knew had done what he did to me. It didn’t make sense—unless I had been picked out by Cedric Bonsecours, if that was his real name, for whatever purpose he intended, and, by God, that was as borderline paranoid as I’d ever been in my life.

Cedric had mentioned the Westin Peachtree and the city view from the fiftieth floor.

In one of the chairs near the windows facing Peachtree, I sat holding the *Journal-Constitution* as though I were waiting for a guest. I felt stupid like one those seedy private eyes in a Turner channel rerun of a noir film, lurking in the lobby, hiding behind a newspaper.

At 3:45, Cedric exited his elevator and stopped by the front desk and spoke a few minutes with one of the clerks. No luggage with him so I had some time to act. He headed out through the glass-barreled entrance wearing a different suit.

His Uber ride pulled up and he spoke to the driver for a few seconds before getting in.

Stretching, I stood up and walked casually to the elevator. I took it to the fiftieth floor, saw a pair of maids pushing cleaning carts at opposite ends of the corridor. One was African-American, rail thin, in her forties; the other looked younger, Hispanic. I chose her.

Her wrinkled brow and frown at the corners of her mouth told me

she wasn't convinced I was a colleague of the guest in that room until I showed her my C.D.C. badge, which Burns hadn't asked me to surrender. Then I showed her a pair of twenties. Looking over my shoulder at her coworker down the hallway, she hesitated, then nodded her head.

"I'll go inside with you," she said.

She used her master key and preceded me into the room. It looked immaculate, unslept in. Johnny Walker Red on the sideboard and a handsome pair of matching luggage at the foot of the bed. Both opened. I pawed through the first one—all clothing, shirts ties, and folded jacket. A Rolex lay beneath the crisp white and robin's-egg blue shirts bearing laundry tags.

The second suitcase was similar except for some professional journals in human virology, retrovirology, and epidemiology. An article on DNA nanobots technology was held by a paper clip and heavily marked in a highlighter pen.

"*Señor*, you must leave now," the maid said.

"*Un minuto más, por favor*," I pleaded.

I unzipped the side panels and probed along the edges with my fingers. Something hard, rectangular, like a notebook. I pulled it free. Before she could respond to my *muchas gracias*, I brushed past her and headed straight for the elevators.

At an internet café on Marietta, I opened the notebook I'd stolen.

The chemical symbols and higher math theorems took me way beyond my depth. Besides a complex series of chemical interactions, I found a list of cities, diseases, mortality rates, and dates entered into what looked like a simple accountant's ledger. Every place was one I had visited in the past five years from Nigeria backward to Huixtán, Chiapas, Mexico.

The diseases were more familiar. The C.D.C. called them NTDs for "Neglected Tropical Diseases," like blindness-causing trachoma to disfiguring leishmaniasis. The mosquito-borne chikungunya virus on the French side of St. Martin in the Caribbean. "4,600 infected," the ledger noted in small, precise script. It went on like that: schistosomi-

asis, dracunculiasis, onchocerciasis, lymphatic filariasis—all the way up to the big three: Malaria, Dengue, Ebola.

On a separate page, Cedric, if the notations were his, had scribbled this: “H5N1-N, Atlanta.” It listed today’s date, the words *zero mortality*—and most chilling yet, my name next to the phrase “Patient Zero.”

What did that mean? Even more importantly was the question what it had to do with me.

Cedric was stalking me . . . *But why?*

I was a nobody. Few directors even knew my name at the C.D.C. I wasn’t a doctor or anybody important. I considered myself a grunt, a front-line soldier in the war against disease, that was all. I saw death and horrible heart-wrenching suffering every day, but I was little more than a bystander of the world’s pestilence.

It must have something to do with me and something to do with viruses. Twenty minutes of google searching had turned up nothing on Cedric Bonsecours but quite a bit on engineered virus donor-derived infectious diseases. The crucial entry seemed to be the last one, but there was no H5N-N virus. Asian avian flu, the notorious bird flu, is highly pathogenic; the common kind, the low-pathogenic virus, might ruffle a chicken’s feathers and cause a drop in egg production. It’s a distinction of molecular characteristics of the same virus. It’s the species jumper we have to worry about, the one that kills human beings spread by birds. So far, it wasn’t worse than a tabloid scare.

When it hit me, the jolt of adrenalin was enough to make me vomit. *What if the dash N meant me?*

My body was the perfect lab for virus-testing. If Cedric had spiked my drink back in Nigeria, was I carrying a new virus—one engineered like the fatal bird flu but with the characteristics of being easily transmissible from person-to-person? That would make me “patient zero” *for a new world plague.*

I remembered the terrible pangs in my intestines, the vicious headache the following morning—no ordinary hangover. At the bar downtown, Cedric tried to spoon-feed me the notion I was a blackout drunk. The nanobot technology papers in his luggage . . . you didn’t need a

syringe; it was self-replicating nanobot technology of the future he must have used.

He had to get me fired to ensure I would pass on the virus everywhere I went. Infect a metropolis the size of Atlanta, and it would spread like wildfire. Wuhan and Covid-19 taught us that. The people around me, mindlessly tapping away at their keyboards and sipping Red Bull, might be the first victims of a new horrific disease. All those pandemic analogies to the Spanish flu of 1918, born in the filth rat-infested trenches in World War One, in which fifty million souls were scraped from the planet in one fell swoop. If a modern-day Black Plague like that could be “designed” in some lab, this was terrorism on a world-class level, far beyond Nine Eleven.

Just. Not. Possible. I repeated it like a mantra, stumbling out of that café. I had no direction. I was numb. Thoughts refused to come to me in logical order. I walked in the late-afternoon heat until a merciful cloudburst fell upon this part of the city and drenched me clean through. I must have looked like a walking zombie, a homeless junkie, to those pedestrians sheltering beneath awnings or looking out from café windows. How could they know they might be looking at the last days of human existences?

It seemed like some low-budgeted sci-fi film from Hollywood. If a cop on patrol had seen me wandering the downtown streets talking to myself like this, he’d have hauled me off to the drunk tank.

I had to find Cedric. If the killer virus had been designed to attach itself to healthy cells and replicate like another disease, it would prevent alerting the W.H.O. and our C.D.C. to its existence. Time to decimate the world’s population.

I wasn’t sure of anything at this point. Part of my mind balked at the idea I, a nobody born in a working-class family in Terre Haute, Indiana was the anti-Messiah of a new Black Death. I had to get back on Cadric’s trail fast if any answers were to be found.

* * *

Cedric didn’t return to his hotel for two full days. Being on a stakeout

proved to be an exhausting exercise. I ate poorly and slept badly, mostly in my car with a pair of Zeiss field glasses looped around my neck. I had a permanent crease in the back of my neck from the weight of the binoculars, but I wouldn't let five minutes pass without checking the people who came and left all day.

He returned to his hotel at eleven on both nights and remained inside. My continual presence in the lobby had alerted security so I had to take my surveillance into the street. I constantly questioned my sanity.

I called Julie to see if she could put my blood under the microscope. That would be proof I wasn't deranged. Nothing would get past her electron microscope in a BSL-4 lab. She told me I was *persona non grata*, which meant a trespasser subject to prosecution. All the bio-safety labs are monitored by CCTV for safety. Julie would lose her job and, worse for her, it would force her to file a false lab report on any work done at the facility.

On my third night, I scrolled through the news feeds and found a single-paragraph item regarding a disease in Lagos. "Unusual," the staff writer noted, because the "unknown disease" seemed to be centered around the hotel district in Lagos, not the countryside where diseases are expected to break out and infect the city. If it weren't for the fact that a dozen tourists were mentioned as among the infected, it would not have been noteworthy.

I had to get some decent sleep to function. Back home, I picked up the remote and clicked on the TV, muting the sound as I headed for the shower. The chyron at the bottom of the screen stopped me cold. The CDC was conducting an in-house investigation over the possibility of mishandled viruses, "the third time in a year," according to the news crawl.

I left Julie a voicemail. I drove to a nearby store for groceries. When I got back, my recorder's red light was blinking.

She said that my former supervisor, Burns, collapsed at home. His wife found him dead on the kitchen floor. Julie's message said everyone who'd had any contact with Burns was being asked to have blood

work done. Her voice sounded anxious. Burns had no contact with the microbiology labs. He didn't know a saucer from a Petrie dish. If the higher-ups were asking people to be checked out, that meant they knew more than they were telling the public—or their own employees. Julie ended her message saying an “unusual” number of people called in sick.

A second message sent a chill up my spine. The basso-profundo voice of Cedric Bonsecours. “I want my ledger returned, you thief.”

I guzzled what was left of the lukewarm coffee and bolted for my car with the ledger tucked under my arm.

He was sitting in the hotel lobby reading the *Wall Street Journal*. He glanced up once briefly to see me standing in front of him, made a grimace of distaste, and folded the paper swiftly and neatly in his big hands.

“Where is it, Neill?”

“Good morning to you, too.”

“No games, Neill. I want what's mine.”

“I'll be glad to return it.”

All false bonhomie gone, he literally growled. “Of course you Xeroxed it.”

“Of course.”

He nodded once, then shifted back into his familiar role and grinned. Two old African hands meeting up in a hotel lobby.

“The coffee here is very good. Java Blue Mountain. Much better than that liquid filth you've been swilling in your car the last two, three days.”

He caught my surprise.

Ignoring my demands for explanation, he led me to the restaurant. The glittering sun-flecked chrome snake of bumper-to-bumper traffic filled the streets outside the windows. What would they say or do if they knew what I had in my bloodstream? How far would they go?

When the hostess left us, he folded his hands on his belly and leaned back in his chair. “It's already begun. It doesn't matter that you took my notes.”

“Maybe the *Journal-Constitution*, the *Sun Times*, and WSB would think it mattered if I took it to them” I replied. “They have experts to interpret it.”

“Maybe,” Cedric repeated. “There’s nothing incriminating in it. It’s theoretical.”

He drew out the syllables and flashed his gold-tipped grin, the big canines taking me back to my fever dream of the fire going out and the hyenas yipping in the dark.

“Neill, you forget the obvious. You were fired from your job for drinking. You’re a disgruntled employee. They’ll say you’re—what is the word?—*grandstanding* to get your old job back or doing it for revenge.”

I got up to leave, my heart hammered in my chest, hoping he wouldn’t call my bluff.

“Sit down!”

A couple heads swiveled our way.

“Now see what you’ve made me do? I hate to lose my temper. I must recapture my sunny disposition . . .”

“*Who the hell are you, Cedric Bonsecours!*”

More heads swiveled on necks.

Silence. He took several sips of coffee, smiling, oblivious. His deep brown eyes bored into my face reading me for weakness, for something to exploit.

“Here’s the truth. It is our collective goal to save humanity—from itself. We chose you as the vessel for carrying out this glorious mission.”

“Who is ‘we’?”

“We are many.”

Did he know he sounded like some low-grade, demon-possession film?

“You won’t the names, so do not ask. We are committed, Neill. We will reduce half the world’s population.”

Half the world’s population . . .

“Why—why would you even want to do so monstrous a thing?”

“Monstrous? I think not,” Cedric replied casually. “We work for no government, belong to no agency. We are various professionals from all over the world in microbiology, science, and computing basically. Genetic engineers, physicists, and chemists with degrees that would impress you if you were to hear them. Some work in the private sector, many for prestigious universities. Some do not realize their work will serve our purpose. It is better so.”

“Monsters . . . monsters.” I repeated it dully.

“Monsters, you fool? We are saviors, every last one of us. History will record our names in bronze—when the time is right.”

Moral indignation raged in my chest for another, more selfish reason: I was their dupe, their “vessel” for the coming tsunami that would eradicate half the world’s population. Me, a nobody burnout who had seen too much suffering in the corners of the world tourists never visited.

“Why me?”

He pointed to the television in the corner. A bland-faced newscaster read from his teleprompter: “The death toll in Lagos, Nigeria has now reached twelve hundred, with many more casualties expected . . .”

I turned around to see him smiling his gold-capped grin.

“Do you have any idea how many people you’ve infected on those flights back? The people you’ve passed in the street? You’re soon to become the greatest killer in history, Neill. They’ll put your photo in *Wikipedia* next to Typhoid Mary. You should revel in your infamy.”

I picked up the bread knife and held it upright. If I leapt across the table, maybe I could shove it into that fat carotid worm of blood throbbing in his neck.

“Don’t even think of it, my friend. I could crush you like a bug right here. No one would stop me.”

“But then, you’d never get your ledger back.”

“Speaking of which, Neill. I would like to have it back. Not because you can do anything with it. Run to your newspapers and TV stations if you must. Losing it makes me look sloppy. I do have a

reputation to maintain among my peers.”

“They aren’t stupid at the C.D.C.,” I said, grasping at straws. “They’ll have everyone returning from Africa screened for blood infections. They’ll put two and two together fast.”

“We expect them to. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a phone message asking you to have that done immediately.”

“You’re telling me it’s undetectable?”

“I’m not telling you anything—except to say that we anticipated this development early on and our best microbiologists challenged themselves to overcome it.”

“I’ll tell them. They’ll quarantine me.”

“So they will, so they should. But, Neill, what good would that do? Even if they believe such a story—highly dubious, I think, given your recent behavior and your dismissal, they’ll use your blood to develop a vaccine. But it won’t work. It’ll save some, to be sure, but the real vaccine we developed is the only one that can use the delivery system engineered for it. The genie is out of the bottle. You’re dreaming if you think you can do anything to stop it. Think of those infected passengers on those planes—everyone going to all corners of the globe.”

“I can expose you.” My voice had degenerated to a squeak of protest.

“Do you think so? The fates of four billion people have been sealed—thanks in no small part to you. Your soul is as corrupt as mine if that is what you wish to hear. You spoke of your contempt for humanity so eloquently in the bar that night.”

“Four . . . billion . . . people.” My reason and my senses were caving in under the barrage of this surreal conversation.

“You owe it to me to tell me why.”

“The evolution of our species has reached a logjam, Neill. Our monkey brains won’t allow us to achieve a harmonious existence on this planet. I don’t just mean the wars and the random killing that goes on every day in every country. The ecosystem is polluted. Our freshwater systems cannot cleanse themselves in two or three more decades and our oceans are already at the tipping point. Overpopulation is the

biggest culprit in this mess of slaughter, violence, poverty, suffering, disease, and filth. Future-cast projections that all end one way. The earth is doomed. The magic number is ten, Neill."

"Why ten?" I was surprised my mind still functioned to make a coherent response at this point. I sat still but screaming inside.

"Ten billion," Cedric replied. "When that number is reached, it starts to happen. The world begins to revolve backwards, metaphorically speaking. Famine on a scale vaster than anything you can imagine will reduce the American heartland to a big dust bowl. Can you imagine what scenarios of evil will occur? Decency and civilization will be the first casualties. A dog-eat-dog world swallows up every society in a miasma of vice, murder, and cannibalism."

"There are good people in the world. They'll stop it."

"Don't be a bigger fool than you are. The rich and powerful will control what little food there is but anarchy will reign in the streets. Warlords will take us back to primitive times. The slaughter of innocents by man and by plagues unleashed when every corner of the globe has been ransacked for food or shelter and every virus lurking in those decimated forests is unleashed on a sick and weakened humanity."

In the deepest cockles of my heart, I knew he was right. Dip your hand in a lake or an ocean and you will have thousands of new, unknown viruses in the palm of your opened fist. Viruses were once thought of as the leftovers of creation, but they were the agents of so much creation and destruction on our small planet, too. I put my head in my hands. I didn't know what to say. His words were mesmerizing, dangerous to listen to, and they worked their way into my neocortex with a drill-like precision.

"It would take humanity a million years just to get back to this point where you and I are right now, maybe longer. We can save ourselves from that long, arduous climb."

I remembered Camus and the myth of Sisyphus. Pushing a rock up a hill, taking joy in scorning one's fate.

"Who gave you that right to choose?" I asked him. I wanted to

smash his broad face in with my broken coffee cup, rip the smile from his mouth, grind the sharp pieces into his eyes.

“Is that what you prefer, Neill? That kind of world? We can save humanity *right now*.”

“I’m going to expose you and your whole rotten scheme to anyone who’ll listen to me.”

I watched his smile disappear, as if it were shrinking of its own accord.

“Look, Neill. Look at the television.”

I turned my head and saw my own photo. It was my photo ID taken years back at the C.D.C. when I joined.

What the newscaster said chilled my blood. I saw Julie’s photo replace mine on the screen. She was murdered late last night. I was “the person of interest.” He described me as “a recently terminated employee.”

“Here he is! Here he is!”

Cedric had jumped to his feet and was pointing at me. I saw everyone gape at me, open-mouthed. Some of the diners did a fast check of my image with what had been on the screen or what their cell phones were showing.

I stood up slowly and headed for the exit. A police officer came running in with a pair of hotel security men.

“Watch out!” I heard Cedric behind me shout. “He’s got a gun!”

They screamed at me to put my hands up, the cop ordered me to lie down on the floor. I approached them waving my hands, yelling I had no gun, that this was a mistake and that he—Cedric—the man behind me was responsible. When I turned around to point at Cedric, he was gone. I heard a shot and felt the air ripple right next to my head.

I never heard the second shot but I felt the searing pain of the slug as it punched its way through my side and churned everything in its path to scorched meat. I fell down to my knees, my brain starting to misfire in the chaos of the moment and the hullabaloo of everybody screaming at me, diners running and bellowing in every direction like

stampeded cattle . . .

* * *

December. The Moon Before Yule, The Long Night Moon. I can't see it from my cell but I keep track of its phases during its nightly sojourn across the eastern sky. There's a small victory in that, I think, isolated as I am.

I've been told by a friendly guard there are terrorists in the pod next to mine. When they found ISIS videos and jihadi messages on my laptop, the government prosecutors tried might and main to have me convicted on treason charges as well. But they couldn't make that case stick. I suppose planting that material would have been a piece of cake. I spent two weeks in the ICU because the bullet nicked a fragment of my rib and it punctured my pancreas.

The guard brings me papers to read as well as what my lawyer sends me to look over. He has to wear a Hazmat suit every time he comes, but he doesn't complain about it. According to the week-old *USA Today* he brought me last Tuesday, 50,000 deaths have been reported in Africa so far. It's spread across the Horn to those countries below the bulge of Africa's western coast, the same ones where the Ebola outbreak occurred a few years back. Even the C.D.C. had to close down for a month for a top-to-bottom sterilization when a dozen workers from different departments came down with the virus. So far six Southern states have reported cases. About two thousand people have died so far in this country. Like the last pandemic, it begins slowly and gathers speed.

NIH continues to issue positive bulletins claiming the virus is contained but they're whistling past the cemetery if you ask me. They're calling it a variation of the avian flu they haven't figured out yet. It bothers their microbiologists because viruses are supposed to be simple; they latch on to a host and take over its machinery, replicate until they burst, and so forth—except this one doesn't perform that way. Its species-jumping capacity is something they haven't encountered before. They should call it the Jackal virus, as I recall from my dream of

Cedric and his dire warning that “jackals bite.” Cedric himself has never been found. I begged my lawyer to hire a private eye to find him, but the woman he hired came back without results; my lawyer passed on her report and I remember the final line’s banality: “Despite our client’s insistence on his uniqueness in terms of size and mannerisms, males of his race, age, and body type are commonplace in Atlanta, Georgia.”

My lawyer informed me the other day that the case against me for Julie’s murder is “one hundred percent circumstantial,” as if that were good news of itself.

Knowing how big the organization of people behind Cedric must be, their power to blend in wherever they live in the world, hold prominent positions in public life, mask their true intentions, and bring about the same effect as a meteor the size of Mt. Everest hitting the earth tells me my chances of going free are Slim and None—and Slim has just saddled up his horse. Apparently Cedric’s two days in Atlanta were all about setting me up for it. They have my fingerprints, cell phones, text messages—all easily obtained while I was sitting in my car like an ace private eye watching for him at his hotel. While I was watching him talk on his cell phone, he was moving his chess pieces to bring it off: gathering evidence from my house and planting it at Julie’s condo in Buckhead. Julie was doomed from the moment I asked her to look up Cedric on the day I got fired.

I have to credit them for some creativity here, although it will probably get me convicted. Some of the messages show the progression of spurned lover-into-stalker quite convincingly—my language, my phrases. The fact that I told my lawyer we never even dated, rarely spoke at work simply draws a blank-faced stare. He’s no doubt used to people lying to his face and refrains from accusing me. He’s a good lawyer and it would make him happy to see me get an acquittal.

I told him about Cedric and the designer virus let loose upon the world. He didn’t tell me to my face I was crazy but his eyes said it plainly enough. He advised me not to take the stand when it comes to my jury trial. He says a jury won’t buy it, not for a minute, and it’ll

keep me in this supermax in Colorado for the rest of my life. The fact that I'm already here, no more chance of bail than I can put my fist through these cement-block walls, tells me the government isn't planning to lose this case even if they can't prove exactly how I managed to obtain a virus. That's why Julie made the perfect victim. They just need to convict me of murder, and if they had the power to get the venue changed from Atlanta to Colorado despite my lawyer's protest, I believe there are strings being pulled yet by some powerful people way above the lawyers and judge in my case. I've told those F.B.I. agents over and over that the prosecutor's theory of my convincing Julie to walk out with a virulent specimen from the lab out of some revenge for being fired is just crazy—another lone-wolf act of terrorism. The frustrating part for me is they can't find it in my blood. Why I don't know. I'm out of my depth with the science of the virus' mechanism and its properties. I doubt if Cedric himself knows all the intricacies of how it works in a host's body. All they know is that anyone who comes near me is going to get infected and will probably die. They can't afford to let me out.

The countdown has begun. The world is going to end. There won't be any "beneficial adjustment" to the population as those educated fools and their minions believe. Nature always wins. I know something about viruses and it's obvious to anyone who knows what the two words *Wuhan Lab* means. You don't control it with engineering any more than you can with prayer. It will sweep through every continent, country, city, and town. The coefficients and the incidence of infection/mortality are mathematically progressing at the pace that Cedric bragged about in his notebook and said to my face. Arrogance, *hubris*—utter stupidity. We're doomed. The whole human race. I felt like that mad prophet in his cave on the island of Patmos writing about the destruction of the world, the rise of the Antichrist, and the Last Judgment. I used to laugh at the depictions of the monsters his fevered imagination created in those disasters preceded by blaring trumpets—the red dragon, the beasts coming out of the sea and rising from the earth. Only the Nephilim frightened me. Those creatures

created by demons mating with human women in a time before time. They seemed real because they were formed from us just as we are formed from the seething microbial life of the planet. No tropical jungle with higher order mammals exists without ants. Their role in fungi production makes them essential. Einstein said that the human race perishes when the last bee dies. Our species has always existed by a thread even without the tumult of war, natural catastrophes, and genocide.

I see him in my mind's eye as a white-bearded, crazed old man gibbering his prophecies to himself and writing them down for a future that ignored him and his predictions from his lonely cave as mine are ignored from my prison cell. The chaos he said would be avoided was a lie, like so much else. There won't be a government on the planet capable of maintaining order and rule once the death rate climbs to maximum levels where it can't be contained, much less stopped. I've seen it in African villages among the infected; they become pariahs—feared, despised, loathed. Even stoned to death. We human beings have canines and hair on our bodies for a reason: we're animals, not angels. Can you see your average citizen waking up to go to work when the world is burning? The chaos won't stop until the last human being stands on the last pile of garbage dripping blood.

I had my lawyer bring me a bible. He's more convinced than ever I'm not right in my head. I lost my faith a long time ago, but it comforts me to read it before I sleep. Not the gospels but the grim stuff. The Old Testament horrors and punishments the human race inflicted on itself or God inflicted on His people. The lights remain on in my cell, and I sometimes lose track of the time of day or whatever day it is. I used to think of the *Book of Revelations* as the rantings of a superstitious madman. Now, I know John of Patmos sensed something bigger when his world was collapsing around his ears. He in his cave and me in my cell; we're like brothers except that my story won't get heard or written because there will be no one to record it. He's not the only sorehead prophet in the bible. The Old Testament is full of them, especially the woman haters among them. Poor Jezebel, for example,

that murderer, prostitute, and enemy of God so despised as to become an enduring symbol of loathed womanhood. Isaiah reveled in her demise. I wrote his prediction for her from chapter thirteen, verse twenty-two and taped it to my wall. It reminds me of what is coming for the world. She shall have her revenge. I no longer need to read it because it's engraved in my neocortex:

“Hyenas will howl in their fortified towers and Jackals in their luxurious palaces. Her fateful time will also soon come and her time will not be prolonged.”



Robb White has published several crime, horror, and mainstream stories in various magazines and anthologies. He's been nominated for a Derringer for his crime fiction. "The Girl from the Sweater Factory," was a finalist in *The Dark Sire Magazine's* 2020 awards. Recent stories are "Sardine Packing" in *Bewildering Stories*, "The Mansion Dwellers" in *Black Petals*, and "The Little Girl across the Street" in *Tales of the Moonlit Path*. His latest work *Bumstown Reverie*, published by Phoenix Z Publishing. *Betray Me Not*, selected by the Independent Fiction Alliance as a Truly Best Indie Book of 2022.

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