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The Drip By Ray Gunn

It echoed. The sound repeating against the confines of the red Coleman cooler and the drop's impact in the water playing over and over within the ripples.

It was grating on his nerves. Sitting in the house on a dining room chair and trying to eat, JD couldn't get the drips out of his head and they ruined his appetite. He wiped the barbeque sauce from his slack lips with the suit sleeve.

Placing the small cleaned bone on the plate with others, he had grown impatient with the bothersome noise and left the two thumbs waiting for him to return, after he had found drywall compound to fix the ceiling. He gave the hand-less man at the head of the table a swat as he passed, catching his finger on the City of New York employee badge. JD needed to take his anger out on something before he commenced breaking things.

Breaking things wouldn't be good for him; the neighbours could hear and bring the wrong kind of attention. Recently released, JD had no intention of going back to where he had come from. The dirt was still fresh beneath his nails.

Down the creaking stairs he went, into the basement, hoping to find the tools he needed. The Coleman cooler was a bit of luck, finding it sitting in the front closet. The white inside was stained pink but it served his purpose as water catcher. The leak was there when he "entered" the house two hours previous and he thought he would be capable of coping with it.

Clicking the light on, JD shivered at the sight of the autopsy tables filling half of the basement. They were a familiar sight. The one in front of him appeared to be heavily rusted.

"What kind of shit were you into Mr. No hands?" JD asked the air around him. His breath would have been thin fog... if he had any. "Government employees like you have no purpose with a body slab."

Through the floor above he could hear drips hitting the cooler. Scanning a workbench he spotted a roll of drywall masking, a tub of compound and a toolbox.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Biting the tape between his teeth, grabbing the handles of both tub and red painted metal box, he made his way up the stairs, stopping only to slobber a curse over the cardboard when an incisor clattered to the wood step. His grey pallor flushed slightly as his ire rose. He needed to eat in order to get better and he couldn't eat when – Drip – he can't even hear himself think.

Jaundiced eyes scanned the room, he sensed something different and noticed that Mr. No Hands' smile was gone. The man had smiled when he died, a black gummed grin, had thanked JD before the tire iron smashed the side of his skull in. The smile stayed, like he was enjoying the punch line of a dirty joke. What JD saw in front of him was the loose jowled grimace of a man who just realized the joke's on him.

It did nothing to help JD's nerves. Drip.

Drip. If he was going to survive the night he needed to fix the leak and eat. He had survived so long because he knew how to get food fast. The Americas were the ideal place for him since he'd come over with the Conquistadors. First feeding on the Natives who were slaughtered by Spanish blades and then making his way through the English settlements that came later. The wars of revolution providing him ample sustenance. The growing population making it easy to disappear, his crimes hidden by escalating crime rates in the metropolitan areas. Until a few days ago, when he was shot having a midnight street bum snack. The bullet hole through his chest itched even then as he kneeled down to open the toolbox. The toe tag forgotten by the funeral home chaffed his big toe.

The dining room lights caused the knives he found inside to gleam.

New Thrills By Gary Hewitt

Atrocious figures. No matter how many times buttons were pressed, profits turned to heavy losses before the end of the next quarter.

“Mary, is Clive outside?”

The secretary kept her response brief. Mr Hemming was best left alone on bad news days.

“On his way Sir. Do you want me to send him through once he gets here?”

“No, I want him to stand on his head and clap his feet. Course I do stupid woman.”

A flick of his finger and the virtual image dissipated from Mary’s desktop. The secretary felt a twang of pity for Clive Whitby.

###

The Director of Innovation cursed the interruption. He was almost ready with the new killer app.

“Hi Mary. Shall I go straight in?”

The secretary pointed to the sterile door. Clive hoped he wouldn’t be slamming it on his way out.

“Go right in. I warn you, he’s not in a good mood.”

“Nor am I”, he muttered.

Clive glided into the boardroom and was met by the back of Pilgrim Entertainment’s CEO.

“Fucking hell Clive. Down thirty four percent. Thirty four percent and your costs have continued to rise exponentially.”

“We did have it forced on us George. As you know the senate ruling caught us out.”

The CEO turned and glared at his employee.

“It didn’t catch the Mercury Wizards out did it? Soon as the ruling came they rolled out their new creation whilst we sat on our butt. What were you mugs doing in the last year? Why weren’t we ready? How come expenses have shot up by sixty percent? Is it all going on your fucking corporate entertaining?”

Many would have backed away at such a barrage. Clive had long learned that the art of defense was to roar back.

“I resent that. Yeah, we were caught out but you had no idea either, did you? For your information we were getting ready to upgrade the new version of the Caesar Series fighters. If you bothered to read the countless reports you insist we waste our time on you would have known that.”

George fought the urge to grab his employee by the throat. He hated the creative types who dithered in pastoral dreamland and ignored the reality of profit margins.

“That’s bullshit. Your Caesar machines were just re-jigs of last years’ models. I’ve seen the figures and most of your money went on the Quirgle pet series. I should have fired you for that alone.”

Clive poured himself a glass of dandelion water. It helped him keep a clear head.

“The Quirgles were a failure yes, but we learned from them. All right, the government might have brought in a ruling to protect the rights of gladiatorial robots but we just had to phase shift.”

George tapped the first column on his holographic spreadsheet.

“Ninety-eight million and rising. That’s how much you’ve spent in the last month alone! It’s killing us.”

Undaunted, Clive handed George a small circular orb.

“That contains all you need to know about how we bite back. The reason the Mercury Wizards were allegedly ready was because they put out sub-standard baloney. I mean, Dracula, Frankenstein and even Jekyll and Hyde! It’s pathetic and so retro.”

“But profitable.”

Sam By Eric S. Brown

You could ask me what I am doing out here in the middle of nowhere, in a world where most people left alive are either barricaded up nice and tight somewhere, or hiding away in a bunker waiting for the nightmare to be over. If you did, I'm not sure I'd have a good answer. Hell, I don't really understand it myself. Love makes a man do crazy things. I've never met Sam, at least not in person. We found each other by chance through the web. Now before you go placing judgments because of what I just admitted, let me explain that I have not ever been a person who believed in internet relationships. I thought they were just for the losers who were too ugly, hopeless, or socially lost to function in the real world. Besides that, I work online. I am, or was until the world turned to Hell, a journalist. Most of my days were spent researching or typing articles for the network which employed me. Sam was an entertainment columnist too and that's how we stumbled upon each other. I was doing a report about the latest actor stupid enough to get caught with a car full of "Meth" and discovered she'd beat me to it and scooped my story. At first, I was pissed. What self-respecting writer wouldn't have been? But then I read her article. It was well written and as good as anything I was capable of turning out. At its end, with her bio, was a photo of her. My icy, fame-seeking heart cracked to pieces when I saw it.

Princess By Brandon Layng

The water splashed the front of her shirt, a few dish soap bubbles clung to the fabric and Sandra silently cursed her luck. She hated doing the dishes, not that she had any choice, being the only adult in the house.

She held up a spoon, frowning at the stubborn fleck of food, and beyond, to her reflection. Her face was warped by the curvature of the steel yet the utensil made her tired, single mother features look happy. Her eyes sparkled with a smile though working long hours as a cleaner left bags under them. Cleaning at work, cleaning at home. She was tired.

Still, she thought, the least Moira could do was rinse the dishes as she had been asked to do.

Sandra heard her daughter playing in the backyard through the open window and with a soapy hand pushed aside the curtain to see what her little Princess was doing. Barbies in hand, Moira was playing house in the Mattel plastic play set, apparently Barbie and Ken were not getting along; since Barbie was bitch slapping her boy toy.

The Kablowski's seven-year old, Andrew, was watching Moira over the shared fence. The boy's cheeks flushed and he stared intently at Moira, who had begun screaming on Barbies' behalf.

Sandra's throat constricted with the bitter taste of the past.

It had been a year since Bill left. Being the man of clichés, it was with his secretary and their little girl, who was shaking the dolls violently in the backyard, had seen too much in her first four years and none of those wounds had healed. Not in the year since Moira's father walked out without so much as a goodbye.

Sandra had a feeling Barbie had just caught Ken "rubbing" her friend, Cindy, the wrong way. "Rubbing" was Moira's word for sex.

Though Sandra had wished daily that it had been, she wasn't the one who caught Bill cheating.

Moira was. And Sandra was the one who had sent her in.

Andrew Kablowski had moved down the length of the fence. He needed his nails trimmed, they left visible scratches on the wooden fence.

She struggled with an unwieldy pan. It wouldn't completely submerge thanks to the long handle and it made getting the film of egg off, from the omelette breakfast she'd made that morning. Moira had been sullen and withdrawn as she picked at her plate, pushing around the home-fries and picking the onions out of the egg. She guessed it was because her Princess was remembering that day.

###

Sandra had picked Moira up from Junior Kindergarten and they decided to bring Bill lunch. It was only McDonald's but Moira was excited to be the one who would take it to him. In the office, Moira hopped up and down, eager to see her Daddy.

"Go on Princess," Sandra had said. "Take your Daddy his lunch. He'll be surprised to see you."

Grin bunching up her cheeks Moira ran through the maze of desks to the back of the room where Bill's office was. His secretary's desk was empty but Sandra had thought maybe Bill had sent her to get sandwiches or coffee. Her own smile full of pride on her face as she watched Moira open the door and disappear into the office. Sandra could hear Bill say their daughter's name – his tone was definitely surprised.

By the time Sandra stood next to the secretary's desk Moira was in the doorway. Her face was flushed. Past her in the office she could see the secretary latching her blue silky bra back on. Bill stared in a twisted mix of shock and anger and embarrassment.

Never Trust A Vampire By L.B. Goddard

The room was white, sterile, holding nothing of interest to Anastacia's critical eye. The incessant humming of the florescent lights overhead irritated her slightly, like the buzzing of a fly that refused to be swatted away. Still, she kept her composure, back perfectly arched against the hard metal chair. She wasn't accustomed to slouching, no matter what the circumstance. It was a bad habit, better suited for lazy humans.

"Where is the baby?" Officer Barrett's voice broke through the electric hum. He squeezed the handle of his coffee mug in frustration, forcing the blood away from his knuckles. Anastacia enjoyed tracking the movement of blood beneath his skin. It helped to pass the time; it eased the continuous ticking of the clock's second hand, so harsh on her ageless ears.

She didn't speak.

"Look bitch, I'd love to yank those curtains from the window and watch your flesh burn in the light, but I'm not interested in losing my job." He took a drink of his coffee. The mug rattled against his teeth. He was shaky from the last two cups. Sitting across from a three hundred year old vampire didn't help to soothe his jangled nerves. "I can sit here, *right here*, as long as it takes. You think you've seen eternity... just wait."

Anastacia scoffed. Mortals and their empty threats. There was nothing the police force could do to harm her - not legally. If they attempted to abuse her, and she survived, she'd see their asses in night court.

Vampires were considered handicapped, diseased. So long as their lifeblood was obtained from a voluntary source, from an adult who was willing to share, immortals were granted the same rights as human beings.

Of course, there was always the exception--

"The baby! Where is the baby, goddammit?!" Officer Barrett's cheeks flushed with color. She could smell his blood churning with anger. He slammed his fist against the table. A tremor of pain shot up his wrist, spreading through his arm, up to his elbow. He winced.

Anastacia didn't flinch at the vile display; this man's rage was utterly disgusting. To her, he was the worst kind of bigot, trying desperately to break apart a loving family, in order to satisfy his own personal prejudice. Procreation was forbidden among immortals, sure... but only by human law. To her species, a birth was nothing short of a miracle. A soft rose blooming in the barren desert sand, a second chance at life for the condemned. Very rarely were a vampire's lifeless organs able to conceive a child. Anastacia was determined to keep her silence. For her darling Xavier, and the life they created...

She closed her eyes. She imagined Xavier's rust coloured eyes, two circular magnets drawing her near. His touch had caused her long-dead skin to crawl with new and amazing sensations. Her flesh, so numb and leathery with age, had turned to mush beneath his fingertips. She fantasized about running her hands through his hair, so lush and soft and full.

Anastacia, still aware of the policeman's presence, forced herself to stifle a smile.

She thought of Xavier's eleven-inch manhood awakening the woman within her, ripping... plunging deep inside the part of herself that she had abandoned so many years ago. In the days of her youth, before this immortal curse, she would have run from a man of such girth. But a vampire cannot feel things the same as a human. A vampire, she thought, considers it a blessing to feel alive again... if only for a fleeting moment.

She felt the weight of the officer's gaze as she remembered her night with Xavier. Barrett was fuming with rage, she was certain of that, but it made no difference either way. She had to keep her family safe. Slowly, she opened her eyes, meeting his spiteful gaze dead-on.

Just then, another officer appeared at the door. "We've got him, sir. He's right outside."

Anastacia's muscles tightened, though not a trace of panic showed on her stone-like face. What did they mean "We've got him"? Got who?

Warm Body in a Cold World By Lori Bowen

America only started to pay attention to the problem when the outbreak reached her shores and borders. By then, it was too late. Once the sickness infected just one person, it spread like wildfire. Two was always harder to kill than one and for all her bluster and bravado, America was a land of sentimentalists who wouldn't, or couldn't, do what needed to be done.

Within two days, both the east and west coasts of America had succumbed. Luckily for those in the north, winter had come early and that slowed the sickness' progress, but those in the south were screwed.

The media, sketchy during the best of times, became downright unbearable. Certain news channels, and fools in power, were trying to spin the issue in their favour, inciting God and Country. The majority of America's forces were in another country half a world away and, little did their home country know, very few of them survived the sickness. Soon, independent outlets were the only way to get news out to survivors, but they weren't professionals and they were scared. Some of them eventually started advocating giving up...and they were never heard from again.

That was the most frightening part. Not the inevitability of the situation, but the hopelessness the survivors felt. One can survive anything if they have hope. Some of the survivors clung to the voices on the other ends of their radios as knowledge that they weren't the only ones who were alive, but soon, those voices would give out to the white noise of empty airwaves and the listeners were alone.

No one knew exactly how the outbreak started, or even exactly where. It didn't matter anyway, not to her. She had always been overly cautious and at the first mention of an outbreak, any outbreak, she would stock up on food, water, and medicine. And to think...her husband almost talked her out of preparing this time. Wouldn't he have been story? She was confident that he would've spent the rest of his life kissing the ground she walked on had he not been a damn fool and gone to work that day.

She had begged him not to go, but those stocks weren't going to trade themselves... "And maybe if you weren't so obsessive compulsive about outbreaks, I could afford to play hooky." He'd said at the time. His tone was good mannered, but she could tell that he wanted to have a long talk with her when he got home. That was three weeks ago. It's been two and a half since he returned.

She absently looked up at the clock on the wall next to the door: 7:46 pm. He would be coming back soon from wherever it was that he went in the daytime. 'Probably searching for food,' she thought and had to concentrate hard against the welling of nausea she felt at the thought of what that meant for him...for all of those undead bastards.

"Caroline," said a gurgled and strangled voice from outside the front door. It struggled with the word. In the past, that voice saying her name would send her heart into a whirlwind of happiness. Now, knowing no longer WHO, but WHAT was calling out to her sent waves of revulsion through her body.

Sweetbread By Tonia Brown

Mary Mooney stood in the doorway of her kitchen with a shotgun aimed at her icebox. Or rather she aimed at the black clad rump of some stranger poking out of her icebox. The rump wiggled about as its owner's front half rooted through her leftovers. Now, it wasn't unusual for someone to stop by for a glass of iced tea or an hour's gossip, but never unannounced and certainly not at five in the morning. Mary caught the flash of a blueberry pie with the middle scooped away. The whole, freshly baked pie was spoiled.

"My icebox aint no trough," she said.

The rummaging stopped as the rump stilled.

Mary reached beside her and flicked on the light.

"Get your hands up and step away from the pie," she demanded.

She cocked the gun, to show the rump she meant business, which she most certainly did. A pair of big hands, caked with filth and every nail black with grunge, lifted as the stranger slowly stood. He was as tall as the fridge, nearly as broad, and looked like he hadn't seen the inside of a washtub in a good year. His black hair was greasy and short on his grubby neck. His black jacket was sore fully tattered, too short for his long arms and covered in grime. He looked like he had spent the last hour rolling around in the pig pen. Smelled like it too.

"Now turn round, real slow like. One wrong move and I'll empty this here buckshot into your butt," Mary said.

When he finally turned to face her, Mary regretted having asked him to. He was a horrible site. The skin of his face not covered in blueberries had a sickly green tint to it, like a mouldy hide stretched taut across his skull. His lips were thin, black lines pulling tightly away from his blueberry stained teeth in an eerie half grin. His eyes were milky, dark marbles floating free in their sockets. In short, he was a monstrosity. A big, filthy, blueberry pie stealing monstrosity.

"Hey honey," it said through a mouthful of pie.

It was then that Mary recognized him as her big, filthy, blueberry pie stealing monstrosity.

"Rufus?" she asked. She dropped the shotgun and covered her mouth as her eyes flew wide with terror.

"Careful Mare Bear," Rufus said as he pointed to the clattering gun.

"But Rufus," Mary said through her fingers. "You're d-d-d-dead!"

"Well that's a fine how d'ya do. Come down for a snack and you wanna kill me fur it." Rufus frowned as he wiped the pie from his face. He stopped as he spied the berries on his muddy sleeve. Understanding came upon him and he felt duly guilty. "That pie was for church. Weren't it? I'm sorry, sugar. 'Ain't no need to shoot me over it."

He stretched his black lips back, baring his teeth. Mary's stomach lurched at the gruesome sight. What should have been a sweet smile ended up a slavering snarl. Her knees wobbled and she grabbed a kitchen chair to steady herself.

"Roo, it ain't about the pie. You was dead, honey. Stone dead," she said.

"You been at my still?" Rufus raised a half brow and cocked his head at her with a loud crack.

"You been dead 'bout near two weeks." Mary sat at the opposite end of the table, far from her dead husband.

The Pit By John Grover

“Next,” the voice called from the darkness.

Two uniformed guards dragged a gaunt, snivelling man into a cone of light. Tears of blood streamed down his cheeks as they forced him to his knees.

“The charge?” the disembodied voice asked from the dark.

“Stealing,” one of the guards grunted.

“How do you plead to the charges?” the voice asked the gaunt man.

“I was hungry!” the snivelling man cried.

“Take him to the pit,” the voice answered.

The guards dragged him off. His screams dwindled into cold silence.

In the further reaches of the dark, behind bars of iron, in cellblocks filled with claustrophobia and fear, the others awaited judgment.

“Filthy scum,” a bald man grumbled, eyes locked on the light in the distance.

“Keep your voice down,” a pale woman warned. “They’ll take you next.”

“He was my brother!” The bald man turned and stared at her. Their vacant eyes met until his gaze hit the stone floor. It felt cold under his bare feet. Hunger was gnawing through him. “Call me Isaac.”

“Eleanor.” She put a hand on his bony shoulder. Her touch felt like parchment paper.

“My brother was Elijah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. Not anyone’s fault. We didn’t ask for this. We didn’t cause the plague. The pain...it hurts so bad.”

“I know. It’s been so long. Soon we will all—”

“Don’t say it.” He pulled away from her and stole a glimpse of the huddled masses in the back of the cell. They quivered and held each other tight, hiding their faces beneath tattered blankets. “They can’t treat us like this. We’re not animals.”

“They’re frightened,” Eleanor said. “It’s the dawning of a new day and we don’t belong here anymore.”

“We haven’t done anything wrong. It’s not a crime to exist. They shouldn’t destroy us for wanting to survive.”

“Not sure they see it that way.” Eleanor looked through the bars and shook her head. Footsteps resounded. She stumbled back with the others and hid her face.

“It’s been nearly a year now and the world didn’t end. We’re all in this together. Us and them. Don’t they see that?”

She didn’t answer him.

“I remember back then,” Isaac continued as if telling his tale to a new generation. “When the plague had swept through everything...”

Acceptance By Jason A. Lavertue

The cavern of Samantha Stewart's mind still echoed with the last warning she had hollered. She told herself not to eat the child, but her dead body ignored her suppressed consciousness and attacked.

The tearing and grinding of fresh flesh could not mask the young boy's dying screams. Her outer self, as she now referred to the body that had disconnected itself from her mind, never cooperated with what she felt deep inside her psyche. And even though you couldn't tell from her outside appearance, it bothered her immensely. She wanted to die, or if she was already dead, she wanted to be one of the un-living dead.

The scene had played itself out numerous times since she became a zombie six months before. She didn't know how it happened. One day she was lying on the couch with her boyfriend Steve; the next day her human mind was pushed aside and couldn't prevent her need for flesh as she tore Steve's jugular from his neck.

She remembered watching a television newscast about some kind of infection that was affecting certain people in the world. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason behind the disease. Some people caught it, others didn't. It was one big cosmic lottery.

Of course, speculation about the source of the affliction ran rampant. One expert said terrorism was to blame, another said global warming, and yet another suggested God's punishment for years of mass, unadulterated sinning. She remembered telling Steve that it figured that the pundits and politicians would choose sides even as people died. That was the last news program, or any other mindless show, she had watched. The life of a zombie had no time for such trivial things like TV or reading. All it wanted to do was quench its voracious urge to eat.

She had gone a long time thinking she was in a dream. Having majored in psychology, she knew this was a form of denial, step one in the Kubler-Ross model of the five stages of grief. Then step two followed, anger. "Why is this happening to me?" was the next question she asked herself repeatedly. Step three, bargaining, was weird for Samantha. She actually longed to survive, even though it meant killing innocent people. She hoped to live long enough until someone developed a cure for her horrendous disease. She had recently moved on to step four. Depression was her current state of mind. She didn't want her zombie body to eat in hopes that it would starve and perish. No matter what she was thinking on the inside, her outer self always found an unsuspecting morsel to keep its energy up and sustain its one-track life.

Samantha knew what the last stage entailed, and she dreaded its arrival. Acceptance was something she hoped would never come. She prayed that a bullet from a prepared victim would find its mark before her body could feast. She had developed a theory that once she accepted her zombiedom, it would be too late to re-humanize her if a treatment was found. She knew acceptance would obliterate her mind forever.

Maybe that wasn't so bad, she thought, and then quickly chased it from her mind.

Samantha believed the only way to keep the zombified part of her brain from taking total control was to think and think some more. She thought about Steve and her family. She reread all the books she ever read and watched every TV and movie locked in her mind's vault. She told herself a thousand times a day that she was not dead. She believed science would find the answer. It hadn't worked for cancer or AIDS, but anything was possible.

A scream or someone darting away in fear usually interrupted her thoughts. This was the sign that dinner was about to be served. Quick movement and high-pitched shrieks were crucial to the zombie's hunting senses. Samantha figured this is why she had dined on so many children. They were always so quick to run or scream in fear at the monster she had become.

Ghost Light By Kristi Petersen Schoonover

She's sure she blew out the candles before leaving the house; she's sure she did, but she still panics when she pulls up to her block's battered stop sign: this is her last chance to go back and double-check, because once she's on the main street there's no safe place to turn around until she gets to the store, where there are guards, lights, and people.

No, she won't go back. She needs to get to the Everything's and replenish her supply of candles, quickly, before night spreads. The candelabra, its thick arms veined with red wax, would keep watch over the darkest corners of the remaining walls of her house that hadn't burned last month in the fire. She still lived there despite its decrepit condition, despite the memories of the night when that same candelabra had sparked a conflagration and a pneumoniac fear had catapulted her, stumbling, into the street – without her daughter. “Help me!” She'd screamed, her only response the narrowed eyes of her neighbours as they'd hovered protectively near their homes, because they knew why the fire had started: she, Miss Mel High-and-Mighty, refused to go over to using Soul Lamps, they'd whispered. She announced at the neighbourhood meeting the swatches of cold blue light twitched on her floors like decapitated warriors, that's what she said, I heard it plain as day, they'd gossiped. Miss Mel High-and-Mighty, all she's got left is a dead daughter and a house defrocked of a few walls. No wonder Jesus left her behind.

The main drag is a graveyard of weed-snared mini-malls and fast-food chains with broken windows. She's been warned of gory scenes inside: exploded wallets, rotting food, half-bitten burgers belonging to souls Raptured in mid-chew, spilled milkshakes where paper-crowned women hadn't finished filling orders.

A watery sun melts behind the skeletal Appropriation Towers; after dark, they wink open and snatch up the souls of the dead, the ones who died after The Rapture. After dark, the thousands caught are rammed genie-style into pre-made lamps that now light every home in America. After dark, her daughter's wandering, scorched soul somehow cleverly escapes the Towers' pull. After dark, Mel begs a God she's sure no longer fields the earth's cries to suck her daughter into one of those lamps so the hauntings will stop: her daughter's soul will go into a lamp and illuminate someone else's walls because she, she will never have one of those lamps in her home.

She has trouble finding a space and shoe-horns between a pair of overturned shopping carts. Something bangs on the hood of her car and there is that unmistakable head of blond curls belonging to her dead daughter, her pink dress spattered with the same soot marks as the morning the firemen extracted her languid body. “Read the bunny story, Mommy!”

Mel wrenches her keys from the ignition and scrambles out the door. She seizes the handle of an Everything's cart, which is emblazoned with the name of a defunct hardware superstore where she'd bought real light bulbs back when electricity was so common it was taken for granted. She mentally counts how many candles she can purchase with the fifty-two dollars in her purse. Above her, the Everything's soul-lit sign spits against swollen storm clouds trundling overhead; the walking dead are crammed into the curve of the G and the arc of the N and she knows that if lightning should strike they will be caged no more.

The soul-lighting in the store stains her hands glass-cleaner blue; it washes her fellow shoppers in bruised, puffy shades of drowning. The lights quiver and make a rat-a-tat sound, but this distracts none of her bluish counterparts from their purchases: batteries, canned goods, shoelaces.

Substance Sixteen By Sarah Reece

In late 2020, the United States government made a breakthrough in their bio-weapon technology: Necrodyne. Not only was Necrodyne dangerous, but it was unstoppable. Little was known about The Virus, only that it would decompose any being—alive. How it was spread is unknown, how it reacted was unheard of and what's worse—no cure was ever discovered.

You. You created it. Did you mean to? Do you remember how it happened?

Day One

Mixing vials of animal DNA with diseases is a daily routine to you, and you do this carefully, but with confidence. The caged rats against the dull grey wall in the back of the lab scratch and sniff, crawling their way up the glass. You reach for a syringe, carefully drawing 1 ml of Substance 16 out of the vial. The 16th time's a charm.

Hold still. You grip its ribs and inject Substance 16 into its spine. The rat calms. You place him back into his glasshouse and examine him. Waiting, ten seconds, twenty seconds. Black spots appear on the subject's pigment, under its only patches of white fur. Reaching into the cage to pull him out, you notice the fur on those darkened areas falls off. Experiencing mild distortion; the rat is wobbling, side to side. Into your recorder, you make many notes of what this rat is showing. Subject has fallen. Waiting. Subject did not survive Substance 16. Back to the drawing board.

To dispose of an animal is like throwing away a tissue. Dressed in a large blue lab coat, mask and goggles over face, and white gloves to your elbows, you try to remove the rat from his cage, but when you touch him, your finger falls through his flesh. Quickly you withdraw, shocked by the spongy organs you just penetrated. You wait, dangling your hand in the cage, but unwilling to touch him again. Through your goggles you see only the black fur falling off of what was once flesh and is now simply not there. An odour floats up through the cage stinging your nostrils. You reluctantly touch the subject again, this time carefully watching his body. The fur falls off everywhere you touch, as if it was never attached.

Subject's organs are exposed. Hair loss. How the skin broke is unknown. Flesh is blackened as if...as if it decomposed in seconds. Tomorrow testing Substance 17. A normal day for you, only the decomposing flesh is new. You leave the lab, with the hopes of creating a mutant rat the next day, more powerful than the others. Once a Substance can be successfully transferred, it will be ready for human testing. The rain pours down on the pavement as you exit the building. You stand still for a moment, and look up at the moon. Red—innocent blood was split. And for that split second, you question your position in the government.

Worms By Jeremiah Job Levine

“Can you talk to this guy, Valerie?” asked Lisa in a dramatic whisper. “He creeps me out big-time.”

“Why?” Val asked her. She snapped off the latex glove and pulled it down over the margarine container with the stool sample. They'd been getting slammed all afternoon, and now that the last appointment was finished, she'd told Lisa to watch the front desk while Val got the day's accumulated blood, stool and cultures ready to send out to the lab. She didn't trust Lisa just yet to get all the lab requests written up properly.

“He smells like liquor,” said the new girl. “And there's another smell, I don't know if it's him or his cat. Smells rotten.”

“Worse than this?” Val asked her with a smile, chucking the stool sample into the trash can and washing her hands. Another glorious moment in the life of a veterinary technician.

“Smells like infection,” said Lisa.

“Not one of our clients?” Val wanted to tell her she had to handle it. Lisa had been working at the clinic for almost a month now. Sooner or later she would have to realize that they didn't only work with the cute, well-groomed fuzzies, that they had customers who stank and patients with massive infections.

But today, judging by Lisa's face, was not the day for that. Lisa was shaken. She looked like she was trying hard not to vomit into the sink.

“Definitely not one of ours. He walked in carrying a cat in a cardboard box. I think he's homeless. I'm not joking, Val. He stinks.”

“Okay, let me talk to him. But you owe me one. You have to take Mrs. Henderson and Ginger Snaps tomorrow.”

“No problem. Thanks, Val.”

“See if you want to thank me after you meet Ginger.”

She went out to the front office, and smelled it immediately.

The guy did look kind of homeless, but he wasn't the usual kind of homeless. Young, for one thing. He could have been one of Val's classmates. He wore an enormous grey hoodie and faded jeans that were all but shredded. Both were decorated with generous grease and dirt spots.

His knuckles were horrific split ravines. He looked like he had been punching a brick wall a while back. In those ravaged hands he clutched a cardboard box that mewled plaintively.

The man and the box stank of corrupted flesh. It wasn't the worst miasma of infection Val had ever encountered, but it was up there in the top ten for sure.

Val clenched her jaw to keep from grimacing, and asked him; “How can I help you?”

Not that she would be able to help him right then. Doctor Little had already left for the day. All she could do for him right now was set up an appointment for the next morning.

“My cat got worms,” said the wreck, letting out a breath of alcohol that almost managed to overpower the reek of infection. He was missing several teeth, Val noticed.

“Worms in the stool?” Val asked. That would be great. If the guy saw worms in the stool, they were most likely tapeworm. They could give the kid a couple of droncit pills and get him the hell out of there.

“No. On her face,” said the kid, setting the box down on the floor in front of Val.

Val felt her heart sink. Worms on her face meant maggots, most likely. She hated maggots.

But she swallowed her disgust and knelt down by the kid and opened the box, expecting the worst.

It was worse.

In Gray By Christopher Allan Death

A Doberman Pinscher. That's what it was.

Andy Mahoney stood beside his old Ford utility truck, surveying the desolate neighbourhood. He'd brought his double-barrel shotgun just in case, but it didn't look like he would need it. The little New Mexico town was quiet as a graveyard.

Andy cleared his sinuses and slung the shotgun over his shoulder. The only sign of life he'd seen so far was the dog that had trotted across the street a hundred feet to the south. It had been dead – no doubt about that. Its hair had been falling out in greasy tufts, and part of its nose had been torn away, probably by a passing motorist.

At first, Andy had trouble identifying it. He hadn't seen a dog for so long that it had taken him by surprise. Most of the dogs on the east coast had long since been devoured by their virus-laden owners. The southwest, however, seemed to be different.

"Fuckin' rednecks," Andy growled. "The world would be better without 'em."

The old handyman hitched up his suspenders and pressed a cigarette between his lips. He'd been driving for the last three days, stopping only to re-fuel his truck and to check his position on maps he'd stolen from gutted grocery stores. He didn't know where he was headed, really, but he figured moving from place to place was safer than staying in one spot. And since he hadn't been infected yet, his plan seemed to be working.

Andy took a deep breath and flicked his cigarette into the street. It flipped several times in midair, spewing ashes, and landed in gooey, sun-roasted pool of blood that had formed against the curb. Flies and gnats encircled the purple goo, as if trying to decide whether to stay and raise their young, or move on to greener pastures.

"I'd keep goin', if I were you," Andy murmured to his miniature counterparts. He didn't know if insects could contract the virus, but something told him it didn't matter. He'd read once that the average household fly carried approximately one million diseases.

Talk about a dirty whore, he thought.

The wind whistled, and directed Andy's attention toward the cluster of houses across the street. In one of the shattered, snaggletooth windows he saw a face emerge from the shadows. It was small, pale, and partially rotted; the face of a child whose life was snubbed out in the flower of his youth.

"Poor bastard," Andy said. He didn't have time to sit and contemplate the cruel nature of reality, though. He had to hurry and gas-up his truck before the locals took an interest in his affairs. One, it seemed, had already noticed his presence.

With a stretch, Andy approached the little Sinclair convenience store. The windows had been barred, and the door covered with a solid steel plate. He understood the precautions, though. With such a high population of infected roaming the nation, it was better to be safe than sorry.

A hand-made sign swung in the wind, dangling precariously from the battered door handles. It said:

Unleaded: \$90.00

Super Unleaded: \$109.95

Diesel: \$130.00 \$140.00

CASH ONLY!

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