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THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

WE LIVE IN A SEASON OF VIRUSES. Entera, Ebola, H1N1, HIV, rabies, yellow fever, Marburg, avian flu — the list is limitless and mutable. Rex and I meet, fall in love, and marry while an epidemic of Crimean–Congo hemorrhagic fever wipes out 10% of the population of Indonesia. Every year it seems something new emerges and asserts itself. One month there is an outbreak of Rift Valley Fever in Angola, the next it is monkey B virus in Colombia. We celebrate our fifth anniversary as the Spanish flu sweeps across Western Europe, killing tens of thousands. We listen to Satie, reflective and romantic. We sip champagne. “To my beautiful bride,” Rex says. I smile while the cat licks caviar off my finger under the table. “Here’s to another five healthy years,” he says lifting his glass.

“God willing,” I say even though I no longer believe in god.

With each new outbreak, Rex and I hold each other a little tighter, try to be a little kinder. Still, every year the spread and scope of each new outbreak worsens. More people sicken and die. Scientists and governments are baffled, but they battle on. New vaccines, new treatments. Pharmaceutical companies thrive while the general population suffers. The rich get richer, the poor die, and the rest of us buy facemasks and temporary decontamination airlocks for our homes. Rex and I leave ours up all year.

As this continues, the world adapts. That’s what we do. We find a new normal, a way to hang on to the things that are important: Commerce, Politics, Religion, and for some of us, Family. Love blossoms even in a time of viruses — Rex and I are no exception. The world continues to spin. People marry, babies are born, old people die — of things other than a virus once in a while. The death industry booms. We’re ready for anything, or so we think.

Then it happens. The super bug emerges. The media dubs it The Red Death, after that story by Edgar Allan Poe. Rex laughs at the silliness of the name the first time he sees it in his news feed. “Somebody’s taking their English degree a little

too seriously,” he says over morning coffee. I chuckle and nod, but The Red Death is no joke. The disease is horrendous, a ghastly hemorrhagic strain. There are two outcomes, the most likely of which is death. The mortality rate is approximately 60%, slightly lower than monkey B or Marburg, but much higher than something like H1N1. The other, less likely outcome, is immunity. Talking heads tell us that scientists believe that approximately 10% of the population is born immune. It’s reported that they’re working on a genetic test to limit exposure. Reports say they’re close. Those who survive the Red Death are immune. The problem is they are now carriers. And the Red Death is highly contagious. None of this bodily fluid business. This shit is airborne. One cough and you’re screwed. Whammo! But unlike the other hemorrhagic bad boys like Ebola and Marburg, where victims are sick within days, the Red Death can take weeks to show its ugly face. Although, they say those who show symptoms right away are more likely to survive. Rumors reported as fact? It’s hard to say. We’re all immunology experts now, including me.

What we do know is the infected bleed out through their pores and their guts liquefy. Fun times. This method of transmission ensures that, at some point, nearly everyone on the planet will either die, or become immune and infectious. Rex says the world as we know it is fucked. There is no stopping the trajectory of this whole deal. Preachers are preaching, scientists are experimenting, POTUS is yapping from his underground bunker. Meanwhile, the rest of us are trying to keep our heads on straight, while everyday life has taken on the tenor of a Monty Python sketch. You know the one I mean, ‘Bring Out Your Dead,’ from *Holy Grail*? The scene is horrible. Death, decay, the stench of it all, but we’re laughing anyway. It’s funny, right? The old man says he’s not dead yet, but who cares? He’ll be dead in a day, or not, what’s the difference? “Bring out your dead!” Eric Idle says as he rings a bell and pushes a cart of dead people along a filthy street. Instead of Eric Idle, we have white panel vans with loudspeakers driven by highly paid, immune undertakers. “Bring out your dead!” the loudspeakers shout. Or maybe that’s only in my head. When one of the knights gallop by, Idle remarks that he must be a king because he doesn’t have any shit on him.

Rex and I have taken to wearing our “gear” as we call it, almost everywhere. We always wear it to work. We have to or we’d be dead by now. I know, we still go to work! Well, mostly we telecommute, but occasionally a face-to-face meeting is

required. You might think that everything would just grind to a halt, and civilization and commerce would crumble, but that's not what happened. Not even after the emergence of the Red Death. There's no apocalyptic dystopia here, at least not like you see in movies or read in books. No gangs on horseback hunting down survivors for sport. The animals are all still in the zoo. No, we just keep plugging away. There are a lot fewer of us now. Everything has gotten very expensive, but on the upside, rush hour is a breeze. The only people you see in the gear anymore are people like Rex and me. People who somehow haven't gotten sick. Most anyone else walking around has gotten sick, has recovered and is now infectious, or was immune in the first place. My husband and I don't know if we're immune, or if we'd survive exposure. We've made a tentative plan on our anniversary to go out without our suits and let the chips fall where they may. I say this is tentative because neither one of us is sure this is what we really want to do. We could be committing suicide, and as fucked up as everything is, I don't think either of us really wants to die. Neither of us minds the suits so much. Sometimes we even wear them to bed. At some point, the government may force all those not already infected into facilities where they will expose us to the virus and complete the thinning of the herd. This is the rumor on the internet anyway. Survivalists are making a big surge as you might imagine. I'm not sure what I want to do. Rex doesn't know either. We're still young enough that we occasionally feel invincible.

Before this all happened we wanted children. Sometimes, we still talk about it. We fantasize about what life will be like after the cure, the way people used to fantasize about winning the lottery. We forget, for a night, what the world is really like for people like us, the uninfected, and screw like it doesn't matter what happens. Rex likes to say we're rolling the dice, telling fate to fuck off. Usually, I take a morning after pill, but not always. There's a big push for the survivors to have children. Time to repopulate! Rex and I hold out hope that the scientists will figure something out. We dream about taking our kids to the beach, of posting funny videos of them pulling the cat's tail. Rex says dreaming is about all we have left. He says, what's it cost? I hope he's right.

About a week before our anniversary, I have a mandatory face-to-face at work. These always make everyone edgy, but I can't not work. Being uninfected is not a disability

yet, so I suit up and go in. There are a few of us left in the office and they have us stashed, for our own protection of course, in a small office in the back of the building. They gave us a one stall bathroom with low level decon, which means it's sterilized every day and no one uses it but us, but nobody ever wants to risk it. We all wear Depends instead. It's disgusting, but the alternative is not really an option.

I boot up my system and see I've got an email. *Please log in. You have a new message on MyHealthUpdate.com.* I've recently been to the doctor. They send us messages like this when our test results come back. I definitely don't have the Red Death, or I'd be dead already, but I haven't been feeling great. Tired a lot and kind of weepy. I assumed it was the strain of living with so much death, the stress of getting to work and home without infecting myself, but Rex said he thought I should go see someone. "People still get sick," he said. As you can imagine, the suicide rate is also very high these days. He worries about me. I love him, so I went to the doctor. I'm not going to kill myself no matter how bad things get. I don't think I've got it in me.

I log in and open the test results: I see a bunch of numbers I don't really understand and my heart feels like it's wrapped in barbed wire. There are words like hemoglobin and hCG and viral load, and positive and negative. I swallow. My throat is dry and I blink for a second and then open the doctor's note, which is also on *MyHealthUpdate.com*. The note reads: *Mrs. Oliver tested negative for any viral infections, including SB32-1. She came in complaining of fatigue and restlessness. Recommended that she seek counseling and gave her a referral, but warned her it would take months to make an appointment with a therapist. Tested her for a variety of other possible conditions (see report specifics). All came back negative except pregnancy. Note: patient should call office for follow up with a gynecologist.*

Pregnant. Well, that puts a different spin on things, in particular the upcoming anniversary party. *Patient should call office for follow up with a gynecologist.* Patient should call husband, is what patient should do. Or maybe patient should strip off her hazmat gear and take a walk in what's left of the shopping district, plant a celebratory smooch on a stranger and see what happens. Roll the dice, as Rex says. Buy a lottery ticket. Tell the Red Death to go fuck itself. I clutch my stomach and lean back. My plastic suit squeaks and I think I might burst into tears, which would really suck because I can't take the headpiece off and blow my nose or wipe my eyes. Jesus.

I lumber toward my boss's office and rap on his door. He waves me in. A member

of the 40%, he isn't wearing a suit. He survived a bout of the Red Death early on. His wife and two daughters did not. Standing this close to him always makes me nervous, and he respects that. He does not get up, nor does he offer me a seat.

"What's up, Grace?" Bill, my boss has sandy brown hair and kind eyes. He recently remarried. His new wife is also a 40-percenter. He seems happier now, and I'm glad for him. Rex and I did not go to the celebration. It was an immune only affair. There are lots of events like this now. Immune only. Supposedly for our protection, but I wonder. If we're the healthy ones, why do we have to wear the suits? Anyway, I've tried dancing in this thing and it sucks, so I don't think we missed much.

"Hey, Bill. Listen, I've just gotten some news from the MyHealthUpdate and I need to talk to Rex. Is it okay if I skip the meeting?"

He leans forward across his desk and frowns as if the sun has suddenly been hidden by a rogue cloud. "Everything's okay," I say hastily. I put my hand up in case he forgets and tries to comfort me. Touching an immune is out of the question, even with the suit — too risky. "No worries. We're both okay. No Red Death or anything crazy. Just something I need to talk to him about."

He exhales and leans back in his chair. "You sure?"

I shake my head. "Positively." I smile, but I'm not sure he can see my face behind the glare of my plastic visor.

"You'll let me know if anything changes, okay?"

I give him a thumbs up and nod.

"We'll telecomm tomorrow, right?" he says as I turn to leave.

"God willing," I say. He says something else to me as I scurry down the hall, but I can't quite make it out. I'm not listening and I don't really care. I gather up my things from my desk and throw them into my bag. No sharp edges anywhere — nothing that might pierce my suit. I wave and nod to the few co-workers who are left and slink to my car in the underground garage. Once inside, I start the engine, call Rex and ask him to meet me at home. He was also at work today. We don't usually go in on the same day, but sometimes we don't have a choice. I'm tempted to take off the hood of my suit so I can hear him better through the car speakers, but I don't dare and just shout a little louder. He sounds worried, but I do my best to reassure him that it's important, but not life threatening. I make him promise to take his time.

Chet, the security guard, nods to me as the transponder on my dash transmits

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my clearance code to him and he opens the gate to our community. The lawns here are plush. There is a pond with ducks and a pair of swans, with an aerating fountain in the center. On the outside, everything looks like it should, except of course for all the caution-yellow decon airlocks. Rex and I were so happy when we finally could afford to move to a community like this. Who knows, maybe our isolation helped save us from the first wave. There are a fair amount of uninfected living here.

We tend to stick to ourselves these days, not like we have any choice. Before things got bad though, I never felt like I fit in with the gated community crowd. Rex grew up with money, but I didn't. Half the development is empty. No one knows what to do with all the houses. Eventually, entropy will take them, but everyone hopes there will be some cure or treatment before that happens and new people will move in.

I circle around the pond. The day is gray and it's been raining. I find these days fit my mood better than sunshine. I can't really appreciate the sun on my skin anymore, so sunny days feel like a taunt of sorts, a cruel joke. Insult on top of injury. I make a left onto our block as a white van turns the corner. Eric Idle flashes before my eyes and I blink and swerve for no reason. "Bring out your dead!" I hear someone say. Maybe it's me. I exhale forcefully, trying to calm myself and fog up my visor.

I pull into our driveway and then the garage. The garage door comes down and I exit the car with my belongings. I wave my card in front of the airlock and the door hisses open. I step inside and the door closes behind me with a sucking sound. The walls in the airlock are a strange light yellow, the color of melted butter, or healthy urine. I can't decide which. The decontamination process takes several minutes and I stand as still as I can with my arms out at my sides at an angle so the chemicals can get where they need to. The mist descends from above and comes at me from all sides. After all this time I still hold my breath. The mist clears, the green light comes on and I take a deep breath. Before I can take off my suit I step into a footbath of

the chemical decontaminant. I stand before the other side of the airlock for a few moments trying to decide whether or not to take off my suit. I need to see Rex's face and if I don't take off my suit, he won't take off his. This is how we always do it. Living this way has made us strange.

I remove my hood and shake my head. It's not like I've got long luxurious hair or anything. I guess it's a habit of sorts from when I did. I got tired of my neck always feeling sweaty so I cut it off. Rex was sorry to see it go, but he said he understood. Then I peel back the Velcro down the front and unzip. I shrug the suit off my shoulders and step out of it. There are several hangers on a rack to the left of the airlock. There was a time when Rex and I thought we might entertain some visitors, but that doesn't happen anymore for people like us. We have no family left. I hang up my suit and press the button. There's a loud swoosh and I step through the airlock into my kitchen.

The cat greets me with her usual head butt to the ankles and I stoop to give her silky fur a pat. As I stand up, I notice the blinking tablet on the counter. Someone's called and I think it must be Rex. My first instinct is to pour myself a glass of wine and listen to the messages, but then I remember I'm pregnant and set down the empty glass. I press the button. The first two messages are sales calls. *Are you uninfected and tired of being cooped up inside all the day? Come to our uninfected only virtual beach experience. Safe Vacations provides worry-free outdoor-like experiences...* I delete the message and the next without listening. The third call is from the hospital: *Mrs. Oliver, please contact us immediately. Your husband has been in an accident. His decontamination protocols have been breached.* How can this be? We're so careful. Always. Both of us.

I stumble back toward the airlock, knocking the empty glass to the floor. It shatters behind me and I think of the cat. She will cut her paws if I don't clean up the mess. The poor cat! How she loves Rex. Rex! I feel sick and throw up a little in the sink. I splash my face with water and then quickly clean up the broken glass. The cat watches me and swishes her tail back and forth. Yes. No. Yes. No. I've nicked my index finger and stick it in my mouth as I wait for the green light to come on. Going out the airlock is much faster than coming in, but I have to be careful and take my time. The Velcro needs to be secure. The air circulator hose has to be clear. My booties need to be sealed. Hurry. Hurry. There is a checklist on the exit into the garage side of the airlock.

EXIT CHECKLIST

1. Have you checked your wrist and ankle seals? (I check them again.)
2. Is your Velcro secured? (I run my hand down the front of my suit. Everything is smooth.)
3. Have you remembered your hood? Is it also secure? (My hood is zipped on and secure.)
4. Is your air circulation hose free and functioning? (My hose is functioning. In my anxiety my breath fogs my visor. I do my best to slow my breath. Easy. Easy.)
5. Do you have your keys? (I pat my bag and hear my keys jingle.)
6. Do not skip these steps. Your life depends on them.

I push the airlock button to exit and hear the familiar swoosh. As soon as the light turns green, I dash toward the car and am inside and backing out of the driveway. Rex's decontamination protocols have been breached. No word on his injuries, if he has any. As I pull past the house, I see the cat sitting in the front window staring at me.

When I arrive at the hospital, there are a series of white vans parked out front and two drivers lean against them sharing a cigarette. Beat the Red Death? Have a cigarette! I park in the nearly empty lot and rush toward the emergency room. There are two entrances. One is marked "Immune" and the other "Uninfected Only." I push open the second door and step into an airlock of sorts. Verbal instructions are pouring out of a loudspeaker. *"Stand in the yellow box outlined on the floor and prepare for standard decontamination. Chemicals will commence with the yellow light. No one will be admitted to the hospital without a decontamination scan. Once the scan is complete the green light will come on and the door will unlock. Do not remove your decontamination suit. Only immune individuals may enter the hospital without protective coverings. Prepare for decontamination protocol in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1."* The spray comes down, as usual, and I hold my breath, as usual. Then the scan and the green light. I wouldn't have removed my suit even if I could have. I charge toward the admissions desk and the nurse looks up at me startled, like she's never seen anyone in a decon suit before.

“My husband Rex Oliver is here. His protocol has been broken.” I see her face soften slightly. “I need to see him.”

She slides her fingers across her tablet. “He’s in room 443. Follow the blue line on the floor to the elevator and then up to the fourth floor. The duty nurse will tell you what to do when you get there.”

I thank her and follow the blue line as she’s instructed. When the elevator doors spring open on the fourth floor I am greeted with another decontamination airlock. This one has a video screen inside that connects to the nurses’ station. I follow the instructions and push the call button on the video screen. A pale face with blue eyes and tightly pulled back hair appears on the screen. “Yes?”

“I’m here to see Rex Oliver. I’m his wife, Grace.”

“I’m assuming that you’re also uninfected?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll need to keep your suit on in this ward. Standby for standard decontamination.”

I nod, not sure if she can see me or not. I force myself to be still and hold out my arms, waiting for the green light. I read the sign. Follow the instructions. How many times will I have to do this today? I have done this to Rex. I should have never called him. Our conversation could have waited. Now what? The world as we know it is now absolutely fucked.

The nurse greets me as I step through the airlock. “I’m sorry you can’t take off your suit,” she says. “It’s just not safe for you.”

“I understand,” I mumble. I touch her arm and she jumps. It is a risky thing for me to do, but I want her attention. “No one has told me how he is.”

She looks at me and frowns, her pale lips stretched into a, *I can’t believe you have to ask me* look. “I understand he’s been exposed to the Red Death,” I say. “But I don’t know the nature of the accident. Is he hurt in any other way?”

She stops short, her shoes squeak on the waxed linoleum. “We don’t call it that in the hospital.”

I lower my head and stare down at the floor. “I’m sorry. I know he’s been exposed to SB32-1 but I don’t know anything else.”

The nurse shakes her head as she takes me to Rex’s room. “I hate that term, Red Death.” She shudders slightly as if she’s tasted something sour. “Who reads Poe

anymore, anyway? He would have loved all this, I suppose.”

I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything. Poe was a drunk. I doubt he would have made it through the first wave.

The door to Rex's room is open and there is a doctor standing over him when we enter. The nurse tells the doctor who I am and then leaves. Rex looks at me. His eyes are wide and I can see thin red veins against the white. His lashes are wet, and his fists are balled at his sides. The doctor is putting his stethoscope in his pocket and turns to me as if he's just realized I'm standing behind him. I don't know if I can resist the urge to touch Rex.

“So, Mrs. Oliver, you must have some questions.”

“A few,” I say. I look at Rex and mouth, ‘I love you.’ He smiles for the first time since I've entered the room.

The doctor sighs. “Seems there was a collision with a white van.” He glances back at Rex and continues. “He has a slight concussion from the airbag and a few contusions. He would have been fine, but there was suit rupture, which we didn't see until he arrived in the hospital.” The doctor shoved his hands into his lab coat. “Of all the things to crash into.” The doctor pauses and I can hear the rain outside pelt against the hospital window. It's almost dark now, and I just want the doctor to tell me Rex will be okay, or want him to shut the hell up and leave. He can't read my mind and keeps talking. “We'll know better what we're up against in the next few days. There's always a chance he wasn't infected.” The doctor's voice trails away like he doesn't believe for a second that Rex will be fine. I wonder if this is a lie he tells everyone. I smile and tell myself he's got a 40% chance. He could even be naturally immune and never have any symptoms at all. Wouldn't that be a lucky roll of the dice?

The doctor looks at me hard through my visor. “I know you want to comfort him, but do not touch him until we know what's going on.”

I nod and the doctor leaves. “Rex,” I say. I sit next to the bed with my hands clasped in my lap. “What happened?”

He turns to me. I have never seen him look so frightened. “I just wanted to see you. Are you okay?”

“Me? I'm fine. I should have never called you.” I reach out to him, but stop short. There is the baby, otherwise I would risk it. Or would I? Rex watches me lower my

hand to my lap.

“Please, Grace, do what the doctor says.” He rolls onto his back. “Why did you call me?”

“I got some news today. I don’t know if I should tell you now or not.” I lean forward and grip the edge of his bed, clutching his sheets in bunches in my fists. “What are we going to do?”

He rolls over to face me, careful not to touch me. “I guess we’ll have to wait to see what happens. Now, will you tell me why you called?”

I let go of the sheets and sit back in the chair. The sun has set and the window now reflects an inky black portrait of me in my suit. I think of the cat staring at me through the front window of our house as I drove away. No matter what happens, Rex and I will never live together again. “I found out I’m pregnant.”

Rex exhales. “Shit.”

“I know. I didn’t really know what to think either.” We are silent for a while. Me staring at my reflection and Rex staring at the ceiling. “It’s all moot now,” I say.

“That’s a funny word,” Rex says. “Moot.”

“Moot,” I say again.

“We should name the baby Moot.” Rex laughs and then coughs a little. He looks at me with panic in his eyes. He opens his hand and there is a sparkle of pink on his knuckle.

“I’m going to get the doctor,” I say and push myself out of the chair.

“Please,” Rex says and reaches for me. I evade his grasp, just barely. He closes his eyes, realizes what he’s almost done. “Please,” he says again, “don’t leave. If it’s the Red Death, I won’t be sick for days.” He rolls his eyes toward the ceiling. “What difference does it make anyway?”

I don’t answer, but leave and get the doctor. He returns with me and tells me to stand away from the bed. He examines Rex and shakes his head. “Believe it or not, this is a good sign. You definitely have contracted SB32-1, but,” and he turns to look at me when he says this, “people who are symptomatic this early tend to be survivors. I can confirm that this is rapid onset, which makes me very hopeful.”

“Is that true?” I say. “I always thought that was just internet bullshit.”

The doctor seems unfazed by my cursing. This makes me want to curse more. “No, it’s true,” he says. He turns back to Rex. “We’ll set you up with an IV. We’ve got

some drugs to make you more comfortable, but it's all up to your immune system now." He pats Rex on the shoulder. "It's not like we're in Nigeria or Thailand where the virus is nearly always fatal. I've seen plenty of people beat this thing."

Rex looks at him and laughs again, which leads to more violent coughing. There is blood on his chin, in the corners of his mouth. "I know how many people beat this thing," he says.

The doctor turns to me. "I would suggest that for your own safety you leave. You can set up a video call from home and be with him that way."

I shake my head. There is no way I'm leaving.

The doctor sighs. I'm sure he's seen this before. "It's going to get very ugly. Are you sure you want to see him like that?"

I look at the doctor as directly as I can. "I know I can't leave him alone to die. He's my husband."

"Just don't get too close," he says. He leaves Rex and me alone.

In the few minutes I've been speaking to the doctor, Rex's eyes have gone glassy and there is pink foam in the corners of his mouth. I hope the doctor is right. Normally, it takes days or even weeks for symptoms to occur. The nurse from earlier in the day pushes past me without touching me somehow and moves to Rex with quick efficiency. She sets up an IV and inserts the needle in Rex's arm. As she pricks his skin, blood spurts out around the wound in a way I've never seen before. Rex twists in the bed, but the nurse soothes him with a gentle pat on the shoulder. She tapes down the needle and releases the drugs into his system. "These are coagulants," she says to me. "And a cocktail of pain meds. If his immune system is strong, this will help him survive the next 24 hours. If not, it will help ease his pain." She pulls the blanket up around his armpits and smooths back his damp bangs. Pinkish perspiration has sprung up on his forehead and upper lip. The nurse takes a damp towel and daubs his face. I want to be the one who takes care of him, but that is impossible for me now. The nurse leaves and returns with some ice in a cup. "If you want, you can give him some ice. But honestly, I would let him do it himself." She is shorter than I am and looks up at me. Her eyes are brown. She reminds me of my boss. "Call me if he gets incoherent and I'll come back and give him something."

I nod, unable to speak. I sit in the chair, where I have been sitting all along.

Again I see my reflection in the window, but now I do not know what I am looking at. My suit shimmers like a spaceman in a movie. Suddenly, I miss my mother so much I think I might lose myself. Then I think about all of them. A parade of forgotten faces marches past me in the dark: my brothers and their wives and children, my father and my step-mother, my cousins, my grandmother — all killed by the virus and now Rex lies before me, pink sweat beading on his forehead, a dribble of blood trickling down over his lip from his nose, rosy damp stains under his arms.

Hours pass. Everything is progressing quickly. Rex is listless, squirming in his bed. I try to calm him with soothing words. The nurse comes in to check on him. She takes his blood pressure, listens to his heart, wipes his brow and his nose. Around midnight a bloody tear dribbles down Rex's face and he blinks at me, smearing blood into his eye, which he doesn't seem to notice. He reaches for my hand, but I shake my head and murmur comforting words to him. We talk about the baby like I will have a normal pregnancy and we will have a normal life. We joke about how jealous the cat will be, she adores Rex so. We picture ourselves on vacation at the beach, the baby, now a toddler, splashes at the edges of the sea, while Rex builds a sand castle and I read a treasured book in the sun. The virus has been cured. The world is fresh and new. Our life will be magical. We are so happy.

At about three in the morning Rex whispers, "I hope I die." I've dozed off in my suit and I'm not sure I heard him, exactly.

"What did you say?" I ask.

He turns toward me and tries to smile. "I hope I die," he says.

I shake my head.

"I will never be able to hold our child," he says. "Never kiss you again."

I can't speak. My throat is a fist.

"What will we do?" His fingertip grazes the edge of my glove and I lower my head so he can't see my face.

Soon the sun is coming up and Rex has grown quiet. Both of his eyes are smeary with blood and he no longer reaches for my hand. In the dewy morning, my reflection disappears from the window and all that is visible is pale blue sky. At nine, the nurse comes in and tells me that I should go home. They've run more tests overnight. Rex

has turned the corner and will recover. She tells me I should get some rest. Rex will sleep for days.

I nod and stare as she leaves. I sit in the bedside chair and watch as the orderlies come in. They gently roll Rex on his side, strip his bed, and stuff his bloody sheets into plastic bags. I've heard that they incinerate everything, including bodies when someone dies. But Rex isn't going to die. He's going to live, but he'll be living without me, or the baby. We can video chat, but there will be no playdates on the beach, no laughing as we tease the cat.

The nurse comes in and tells me to go home again. Does she want me to call anyone? I glare at her. Who would she call? Who's left?

I stumble out of Rex's room toward the decontamination chamber that leads to the elevator. As the decontaminant sprays all around me, the video screen lights up and the new duty nurse asks if I need a cab. I shake my head. When the green light goes on I step onto the elevator. On the ground floor, I lurch toward the exit and out to my car. There are more white vans parked outside, different drivers leaning up against them smoking and talking. I wonder if one of them hit Rex, if it was the van I saw when I went home yesterday, turning the corner around the pond in our subdivision.

Unlike yesterday, today the sun is high and the sky is cloudless, washed out, as if the sun has bleached all the color away. My suit is warm. I've been in it now for over 12 hours, and my breath has backed up. Several hours ago I let go of my bladder and I'm wet from my crotch down. My Depends runneth over. I slide into my car and turn the key. When I get to the gate I do not wave to Chet, but stare straight ahead. The swans swim in the pond, like any other day, and as I round the corner there is another white van. I wonder if I'm living in a dream. When I get home will there be a phone call telling me to come back to the hospital that Rex has been in an accident? I pull into the garage and close the door. I go through the decontamination procedure, shrug off my suit, and step into my kitchen. The cat mews loudly. She is hungry and I stoop to feed her. She looks around for Rex and then at me. There is accusation in her eyes. The stench of my own urine is overwhelming and I trudge off to the bathroom, peel off my dank undergarments and step into the shower. I close my eyes and see Rex's lips. Soft, slightly pursed, ready for a kiss. I lean my head against the tile until the water runs cold.

Back in the kitchen there is a message from my boss asking if everything is okay. I shake my head as if he can see me. The cat winds her way between my legs and I pick her up. She is so silky and warm, like a baby will be. I cradle her in my arms and she twists her head around, like cats do. The daylight streams in through the French doors that lead out to our deck. Our furniture sits rusting in the sun, unused since the outbreak. I sigh and look down at the cat. She rubs her head against my upper arm as if to encourage me. I can feel the heat warm my skin through the windows and I squint into the light. I push open the door, and for the first time in years, I feel the grass under my feet. ©