



A MOTHER'S LOVE

STORY 1 OF THE APOCALYPSE



SEAN DEVILLE

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by
Sean Deville

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It had been over three days since the power to Liz's house failed. You might think this would be a major cause for concern, but that was far from the worst thing that had occurred over this last tortuous month. It had been two weeks since martial law had been implemented, a city-wide curfew now in effect to stop the free movement of people. Portland, they were told, was one of the few places to escape the worst of the virus and these controls were essential to keep it that way. Those found breaking the curfew faced summary execution, no matter what valid excuse they might think they had. Man or woman—if you broke the rules, you were deemed a threat and ruthlessly eliminated.

Of course, it was typically women affected by this, because most of the men had gone.

That was the way it had to be, they were told. The same went for the political agitators, the rebellious and those who chose to break the many laws that were previously used to control people's lives. There was no tolerance now. Either you did as you were told, or you were deemed unfit for what was left of the world.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, you see. That was what the talking heads on the limited number of TV and radio channels had told everyone. And, on the whole, the population acquiesced because the military was the only chance they had to survive this nightmare.

New York had been the first city to fall, though the origins of the virus were unknown. Nobody expected it; nobody predicted it, and when it finally appeared, nobody had a clue how to defeat it. It was a silent menace at first, spreading through the population of the east coast, hardly presenting as anything more worrying than mild cold-like symptoms. People were heard to complain that there was a bug going around, passing from person to person, throughout schools and hospitals, with colleagues infecting the people they worked with.

Just a handshake was all it took, or a kiss from a loved one. A cough on a subway could infect dozens; the very air you exhaled could be home to millions of viral particles that floated on the wind ready to contaminate anything they encountered. Anything human mind. The virus didn't survive in any other species.

Then the change came, and everybody's world fell to pieces.

The prime responders were the ones worst hit, catching the virus from those they interacted with and spreading it on to further victims. With a three-day incubation period, the virus was all the way across the city and the east coast before anyone even knew what hit them. By the time the President was

informed that there was a new virus going around, her entire cabinet was already infected. The President, being female, might have survived the virus, but the men weren't so lucky. The men who were guarding her; the men who ultimately ripped her to pieces.

That was the way the virus worked. The plague infected both sexes, but it only changed the males.

As the virus slowly ravaged the host's immune system, the very body itself began to change. At the three-day mark, infected males stopped being human beings when their DNA mutated to allow a new species to rapidly evolve. These new "Adams" didn't reproduce sexually. Instead, they created more of their kind via a much more unpleasant method, and they killed any female they could find.

Male Homo Sapiens warped into an entirely new species through mutation of their Y chromosome. To the women, the virus was no worse than flu.

The first of the infected became Homo Vampirous at 11.13pm on the seventh of June in a small and sparsely furnished apartment in Queens, New York City. Arthur Miller had been his name, an unassuming accounting clerk whose sole claim to fame prior to the virus was that he had once stood behind Robert De Niro in a Starbucks. He was a nobody, a worker drone who went to a job he hated so that he could fulfil the tasks given to him by people who cared nothing for him. Just another face in the crowd of eight and a half million people. He hadn't even been worthy of ridicule.

Nobody was there to witness his transformation, an event so violent and rapid that it drew the disapproval of the neighbours in the property below. Those neighbours, despite deciding to keep their objections to themselves, were soon overcome by Arthur who went from apartment to apartment, spreading the seed of the planet's destruction. By the time a policeman's bullet finally ended Arthur's rampage, he had infected over twenty-seven men. All the women he encountered he killed mercilessly, ripping flesh from them so he could bathe in their blood. All those twenty-seven men followed Arthur on the murderous rampage he had started.

The transformed became known as Virals. Thousands changed in the span of a few hours; millions in the span of a few days. Across America, human civilisation quickly began to fall apart. That was how they lost the hospitals--the injured and the unwell ferried to those bastions of medicine that rapidly became central breeding grounds for the plague.

Whatever the changes to humanity's DNA caused by the virus, it made the Virals strong, durable and allowed for regeneration of all but the severest of

injuries. It also made them crazed for the taste and the consumption of human blood, especially those of females who were hunted down in their droves.

Despite the best efforts of the government, the onslaught of the virus was too great to be kept secret for very long. Even with internet restrictions that nobody ever thought would be needed, word got out before the lid could be put on it. Through social media and the dark web, the reality of what Virals were was released to the world. And the world shook with the enormity of it all.

What male could be trusted after that?

Faced with a Viral, those with the means often ended their own lives rather than being forced to become part of the growing horde. Better to die than become one of those things, was the general consensus. Better to end it all than be eaten alive and drained of blood as the last spark of life drained from you.

Suicides skyrocketed. Understandable really, when you thought about it. Existence hadn't been that appealing to many as it was, and now the apocalypse had arrived.

There was also a misunderstanding over what the Virals were. In the beginning, it was thought that they were just partaking in a mindless whirlwind of insanity and infection. It soon became apparent that the Virals rarely killed the men they attacked; only the women. They would gouge and bite and rip the eyes from people's skulls, but the majority of those males dined on would be kept alive until the virus changed them. Even more surprising was that, as the number of Virals grew, the females would often be left unharmed until an area was cleared of all opposition. Only then would former husbands, brothers, sons and fathers return to the places they called home.

Then the feasting would begin.

Other animals on the planet didn't fare so well. There was no sparing them, though the virus only affected human DNA. Cattle, household pets and even the rats that scuttled in the streets all became food for a creature whose sole purpose seemed to be to strip all life from the planet. The hunger of the Virals was ravenous, their stomachs sometimes distending with the volume they consumed.

Occasionally a male naturally immune to the virus would be encountered. They would be ripped to pieces so that no remnant of their rejection remained to threaten the new order that was taking control.

At first, the scientists thought that Homo Vampirous was a rabid, insane creature, incapable of reasoning or conscious thought. It soon became apparent that, whilst many of them did not speak, the Virals did in fact communicate. Everything they did soon revealed itself to be coordinated and calculated, with

the Virals acting in the way that best helped propagate their growing species. Seemingly mindless attacks suddenly revealed their strategic purpose, with the military quickly becoming overwhelmed by the forces legioned against them. Rumours began to flow that there was a hierarchy amongst the vampires; that some had retained much of their human consciousness. Nobody seemed to know for sure.

What they did know was that it took mere days for humanity to be brought to its knees. As bad as it seemed, there was worse to come.

Chaos surrounded her.

Liz had done her best to keep to the edge of the crowd, not wanting to be swallowed up by the desperate masses. In her right hand, she clutched the tiny digits of her ten-year-old daughter. In her left, she clung to the chain link fence that had been erected to help funnel the panicked toward the waiting trains.

The trains screamed hope. They screamed rescue.

They hadn't let her bring a suitcase or a rucksack. The small shoulder bag with her most valuable possessions was the only thing she had been allowed. Ruby, her daughter, held tenaciously onto the teddy bear, the last semblance of a childhood that had been ripped from her.

Hundreds of people were here, moving steadily forward, with only one direction now allowed for them. Even if she had wanted to turn back, the push behind Liz would have prevented it. There was barely any room to breathe in the throng that pulsed with the prospect of instant insanity. If not for the soldiers guarding the perimeter, madness might have taken them, dozens being trampled to the ground. The trick was to look forward and keep moving.

One thing she noticed very quickly was that, with the exception of the soldiers, there were no men here. Most were off fighting on the front lines against the plague, but there should have been old men or even boys. If there were, Liz couldn't see them. This was a female exodus taken against many people's better judgement.

Portland had been designated a safe city, and then suddenly it wasn't. One day they were being told how the army was winning the battle against the forces brought into being by the virus, and the next they were being told to flee. They had no choice in the matter. Men with guns and NBC suits were going house to house, loading those unlucky enough to escape the virus onto trucks and buses.

It was always men who did this. Throughout history, men had always used their strength to overpower those weaker than them, so there should be no

surprises here. She couldn't deny the concern that welled in her that there were only females in the evacuating crowd.

"Women and children first," was all well and good, but where were the boys? Even when they were being collected from their homes, they had been segregated by sex. If she had possessed a boy child, such separation would have torn her apart. Liz could feel the nightmare of that in the people around her.

"Will we be safe now, mummy?" Liz looked down at the innocent and frightened face of her daughter, the voice barely registering over the scared hum of the masses. What could she say to that? Truth was, she didn't think anyone could be safe, not now and not in the world that was rapidly hurtling toward human extinction. The child needed hope, something that Liz was in short supply of herself. All Liz could do was deflect and try and hide her own fear.

As a mother, she couldn't give her child much except for her unconditional love and any strength that she had left.

"I hope so, Ruby." That didn't seem to help the child, and the tears began to leak out of the corners of her eyes once more. There had been a lot of that the last few days, her daughter both fearful and confused. Now there were no audible sobs, just a yawning pit of desolation that tore Liz's heart in two. "It will be okay. The soldiers will protect you." Ruby didn't seem convinced and who could blame her? The soldiers weren't so much acting as protectors now. They seemed more like jailers, herding their captives to a fate only they could understand.

When they had been forced to board the bus, finally abandoning the family home, Liz had seen what happened to those who defied the will of the soldiers. These hardened men, with their faces hidden by the mandatory respirators, would accept no compromise in the order they demanded. The butts of their guns were used as improvised clubs; skulls cracked as a reward for any sign of rebellion.

They never hit the women though. Only the remaining men who had been too young, too old or too sick to join the fight against the Virals.

"Keep moving," demanded a soldier with a megaphone. He stood out of the top of an army Humvee, his face obscured by apparatus. The instruction wasn't needed; nobody in the crowd around Liz wanted to be here. This city, Liz's home since her birth, would soon be overrun by the horrors surging toward its boundaries. They had been told that the Virals were mere hours away. Their only hope was the trains they were now all being ferried to.

"Keep moving so you can board the trains. The trains will take you to

safety.” Liz wanted to believe that; she really did. So why didn't she? She felt she was being steamrollered, with no opportunity to question what was happening.

The doubts probably surfaced because the men were acting so distant and cold. There should have been some compassion in their hearts, if not for the women then at least for the children. All Liz could detect was determination and veins filled with ice. What had these men seen to make them this way? Their harshness defied the humanity that should have been there.

Liz felt an elbow strike her arm as she was buffeted by the festering panic that surged through the crush of people. She pulled her child in front of her, wary of how vulnerable the young girl was.

“Keep hold of my hand, honey,” Liz warned the child. “Keep close to the fence.”

“Okay.” The terrified response drifted to her. If her husband was still alive, things might have been different, but John had died early on, fighting on the front line. That was what they had told her at least, the letter pushed silently through her door the only notice she was given. Nobody came to deliver the news in person. That would have been impractical with the numbers dying in a war that would very shortly have an end.

She still felt anger and guilt about how he had been forced to do his duty to country rather than be here now to care for the ones who really mattered. How could she be expected to raise a child in this world alone? It wasn't fair, and the crowd pulsed with its own resentment mingled with the hope that salvation awaited them on the trains. For many, this was the last chance to keep their sanity.

The first change had occurred just under a month ago, with the news media barely even realising the nightmare that was growing. The government knew though, as had governments all across the planet because it wasn't just America that saw an outbreak. Every major country began reporting the rise of the Virals--an unstoppable tsunami of death washing across the planet. When the truth about the virus finally couldn't be suppressed any longer, it was already too late.

That was when the cities began to fall, the virus spreading across the land, driven by the relentless hordes that had been created. Military might couldn't stop it, and neither could science. Washington fell before the nukes could be deployed quickly enough. By the time New York and Boston had become

smoking, radioactive ruins, the plague had spread too far to be suppressed by such weapons of mass destruction. If anything, the resulting radiation seemed to strengthen the Virals. Those caught outside the blast zone quickly recovered from their injuries, their skin thickening as if to counteract the future use of such weapons. As amazing as it seemed to the soldiers fighting on the ground, the monsters they faced became even tougher. In some cases, the skin became impervious to anything except armour piercing rounds.

That was the other thing about the Virals. Their DNA was so enhanced that their bodies adapted to the threats hurled against them.

The doctors called it the HV13N5 virus. Everyone else called it the Nosferatu plague because that was effectively what it turned people into. Vampires, vamps, blood suckers and leeches. Virals. A dozen names arrived to mark the ambassadors of the apocalypse. Only sunlight didn't kill them, and garlic had no adverse effects. Religious symbols were about as useful as a fly swatter against a hurricane. Most of the folk lore had been wrong about vampires; made up stories about a creature that, until now, had never actually existed. The vampires of today existed to suck the blood from the living and consume the flesh to nourish themselves. Then there was their secondary purpose which appeared to be to spread the virus that demanded to control the world.

Before the soldiers had come for them, Liz had been woken by the sound of the city's disaster sirens. That could only mean one thing—the city she lived in was close to being overrun. That noise would forever fill her with dread. Just the memory of it sent fear coursing through her nervous system.

Liz would come to fear a lot of things as the days progressed.

Everyone remembered the first time they heard about the virus. For Liz, she had been outside the school gates waiting for her child to be discharged from the private school she and John paid too much money for. It was worth it to keep their darling out of the public school system, but it was a severe stretch on their finances. There were no stereotypical metal detectors or armed police roaming the halls of this school, so they figured it was worth it. Every child who marched out of the main doors was dressed in the regimental school uniform, the height of order and decorum, and the education about as good as money could buy.

“Did you hear about what happened in New York?” The question came from one of the mothers standing next to Liz. Liz didn't mind the woman,

despite the Botox and the designer clothes she had squeezed herself into. Liz couldn't let herself enjoy such ostentatious displays of wealth. They could afford to send Ruby here, but that meant sacrifices which both she and John agreed would be worthwhile. They were both getting by, but only just. Their lives were not blessed by the wealth that she witnessed every day she brought Ruby to school. Some of the cars she saw were worth more than the mortgage on her house.

She worked as a personal trainer in the local gym. John was a firefighter who was greatly overdue a pay rise. That was what parents did, though. They put their own lives aside to raise the children they brought into the world. Whilst she couldn't vouch for John's inner dialogue, not once had Liz ever regretted giving birth to the girl who meant everything to her. Even in the early days of the broken nights and the tantrums, there had never been the briefest instance of selfishness on Liz's part. Ruby was her everything, and she would give her all to protect the child from the harshness of the world.

“No, I don't keep up with the news much.” Liz had learnt that trick early on. Better to keep that bad juju out of her head. Knowing that a recession was imminent or that terrorists had committed some atrocity in a faraway land did little for her mental well-being. Safer for her overall mental health to just shut as much of that out as possible.

“I heard about it,” another of the waiting mothers had said. “Riots all across the city. Isn't it awful? But that's what happens when you let people get fat on welfare.”

“So true,” the first mother had said. Liz didn't bother correcting them. Unlike most of the women that had stood there that day, Liz had not been born into money. She had worked her way through high school and college, finding and loving a man who was equally devoid of rich relatives or business acumen. She would have liked to have told those present that everyone deserved a decent start in life, but she'd known those words would have fallen on deaf ears.

Of course, it hadn't been rioting, not of the kind most people expected. It had been a swarm of vampires overpowering the streets and the subways to spread their viral seed all across the city.

Within two days, the school had closed its doors, insisting that all children stay at home due to the growing national emergency. By then, all the supermarkets had been stripped clean, and there were soldiers on the streets. That was when John had insisted they pack some bags and head into the hills away from the city. Being a firefighter, he had a sense of how things were on the

streets of Portland. He knew bad things were coming, despite the platitudes and the reassurances on the TV that Liz now paid ample attention to.

Liz hadn't listened to his pleadings, and this was a shame that constantly threatened to overpower her. If Liz had taken heed of what John had said, maybe he would still be alive. Maybe she and her daughter wouldn't be here being marched to the illusion of some sanctuary somewhere along with hundreds of other women.

"Give it another day," Liz had said, frightened of what abandoning the relative normality of their lives would mean. Reluctantly, John had agreed to her wishes, only for her husband to be conscripted the next day. The men came in the early hours, brandishing the Presidential Executive Order, and enough force of arms to stop any kind of meaningful resistance. John was marched off with the rest of the husbands and fathers on her street. They even took all the boys over sixteen as well, so desperate was the situation.

Liz choked back the carnage in her thoughts that told her she would never see the man she loved again. Ruby never even got to say goodbye to her father.

"Keep moving forward to be processed," the voice announced over the bullhorn. There were lights shining down on Liz, with no inch of the contained area in any kind of darkness despite the night's sky. Her feet shuffled forward, the fences starting to converge toward a series of gates where more armed men waited. It felt like she had been here for hours, her bladder building its pressure that would soon override her conscious will.

There were a lot of such smells surrounding her now, all of which added to the sense of building terror that needed some way to vent. The gates ahead were the release valve; the people filtered through at an unacceptable speed.

"Mummy, I'm thirsty," came Ruby's voice.

"I know, honey," Liz responded, briefly caressing the child's long blonde hair. She would have given the child something to drink, but the one bottle she had brought had already been consumed.

"Keep moving," the booming voice came again. *Just shut up, damn you,* Liz wanted to scream. "Food and water will be provided once you are through processing." *Processing? Why did they need to be processed?*

Liz took another few steps, the front of the queue now visible. There were four gates, each guarded by two men. Behind the gates were thinner wire tunnels where only a single person could venture through. This nonsensical design was holding everything up. Surely there was an easier way to get them

onto the trains. Millions of people managed to commute to work that way every day.

“But I'm thirsty, Mummy,” Ruby insisted.

“Hush now dear. Not long now.” She hated the irritation that crept into her voice, knowing that her daughter was suffering just as she was. Probably worse, because Ruby didn't have the life experience to allow any understanding of why this was all necessary.

There was no other way to save them. Right?

“Bitch,” someone shouted off to her right. Liz's eyes were drawn to a just visible randomness in the crowd. Another, more colourful word was used, and then the crowd swallowed up whatever altercation had occurred.

The gates finally revealed themselves. The guards were still on the other side of the wire, none of them in reach of a woman or child that might have been brought to the edge of madness. Although guns weren't being pointed, they were being held in a way that could have been perceived as threatening. Women in front of her tried to engage the soldiers, clearly aiming to gain some insight as to what was in store for them. No response ever came, the men stoic and unflinching in their silent vigil.

The gates were basically just turn-styles, which meant that only one person could progress at a time. Each one had two lights. Green meant you could proceed, while red meant you had to wait. This had all been installed ready for the women's arrival, and another nugget of doubt grew in Liz's mind.

If only she had listened to John instead of being swallowed up by her own doubts.

There was a frightening moment when they reached the barrier. Ruby passed through with her mother's encouragement, but the light then remained red for several seconds. Liz caught the harried glance from her daughter, the uncertainty now spiralling the girl to a full-blown breakdown. But then the light changed and Liz was able to walk through the metal arms to once again hold Ruby's shoulders.

“Keep moving forward,” the bullhorn voice commanded. The two passed along the metal wire tunnel and were forced to join a line that ran parallel to half a dozen others. So, this was processing, the numerous signs that were littered around the place giving the same instruction.

Prepare for inspection
Have your government issued Identification to hand

Your cooperation is expected and appreciated

“Name.” Liz and Ruby now stood in front of a table, behind which sat a woman in soldier’s uniform. She wore no form of facial protection, unlike the men who were visible. Still, the men were only seen on the outer side of the wire. Liz looked at the woman and saw the dark circles under her eyes. There was no life there, just benign resignation. And was there also fear? Surely, she was just imagining that.

“Elizabeth Cartwright,” Liz said, thrusting forward her driver's licence. The female soldier, whose name badge said Conner, grabbed it briefly. On the table in front of her, Conner religiously ran her finger down the screen on an iPad until she found Liz on the list.

“Child's name?”

“Ruby Cartwright,” Liz answered. Behind Conner, the train platform could be seen, dozens of people milling there. A train sat invitingly on the platform, but not the kind of train she would have expected. Were those...were those cattle cars?

Conner didn't ask for Ruby's identification, which was good because Liz didn't have any on her. There had only been time to bring the bare minimum once the soldiers had come knocking on her door.

“What happens next?” Liz almost begged.

“Isn't it obvious?” Conner sounded exasperated. Or was there something more there? Yes, there was, a secret that Conner wasn't ever going to reveal.

“My daughter needs water,” Liz continued. Conner didn't even look at Ruby, instead keeping her gaze on Liz.

“You will find everything you need on the platform. Please move along now.” It wasn't a request. Two plastic cards on lanyards were thrust at Liz who took them robotically. The cards were colour coded, and Liz draped one over her daughter's neck. She assumed it was a good thing that they were both the same colour.

Stepping past the table, they joined a disjointed throng that wandered almost hypnotically toward the platform and the train that held such promise and such dread. There were soldiers on top of the train, walking up and down. Their presence should have been reassuring, but Liz found them totally menacing.

There must have been thirty cattle cars making up the length of the train. With a sudden lurch, it moved forward, bringing more of the train’s accessibility to the platform. Were they really going to be expected to travel in those? Things

surely couldn't be that bad.

The pressure in her bladder made itself known again, and Liz guided her daughter toward the blue portable lavatories that had been set up. Whoever had planned this had realised that toilet facilities would be required, and women were already forming up to get their chance. What would they do once they were on the train?

A recorded message, played over the platform's public address system, had instructed them to board the train based on the colour coding they had been given. Each cattle car could be identified by one of the colours Liz could see adorning people's necks. This terrified her, partly because she was Jewish. She had a strong feeling her ancestors had been in this situation before. There seemed to be no sense to this, and no choice either. They had been forced to come here under the umbrella of it being for their safety, and now she was seriously beginning to question the validity of that. Had she brought Ruby into harm's way?

It was something else for her to feel guilty about, even though really she hadn't been given any kind of choice. She supposed they could have tried to hide, but then what would they have done? It would have been foolish to stay in Portland with a vampiric horde marching on the city's perimeter. Anyone left in the city would be hunted down and gorged on by ravenous beasts who cared not for compassion or mercy.

It was also clear that they were checking everyone off a pre-prepared list. Liz had no idea how the list had been compiled, but if their names came up missing, she had no doubt people would be sent out to hunt for them.

There were so many things about this that concerned her, but perhaps the thing that stuck out the most was the way the men weren't mingling with them. Sure, Liz had interacted with a female soldier, but not a single male face had been on display since the sirens earlier in the day.

Liz had acquired some water and food for her daughter, from a table loaded with pallets of the stuff. The child had consumed it all greedily, as had Liz herself. Despite its small internal volume, Liz had managed to stuff four further bottles into her bag. Nobody told her off, and most people were doing the same.

"Prepare for boarding," the tannoy voice ordered. With a uniform action, five of the doors on the train opened sideways, giving a glimpse of the interior. For some reason, Liz expected to see straw laden floors, but the carriage's

interiors were white and pristine.

Those assorted on the platform began to move forward, helping each other up onto the train. When it became Liz's turn, she reluctantly helped her daughter board. By the time she was in herself, the train car was already half full. Liz couldn't fathom why there were no seats; it was standing room only. At least there was evidence of air conditioning, so they had that going for them. Were there so many people that the army felt this was the only way to move them?

Claustrophobia threatened to engulf her, but she had to swallow that up for the sake of her daughter.

Employing the same technique as before, Liz moved over to the side of the carriage, managing to work her way into a corner. The floor underneath was perforated, probably to allow liquid to flow away. The interior was painted white, halogens illuminating the whole sorry display. There were metal loops along the walls at regular intervals, and Liz found herself wondering where these train compartments had come from.

Liz hoped the train ride wouldn't be long because there wouldn't be room here for people to lie down. As more people forced their way in, it became evident that they wouldn't be able to sit either. The smells of the assorted travellers assaulted her nostrils. It wasn't just body odour she smelt, but terror as well.

That terror amplified considerably when the doors to this new prison closed. Within seconds, the lights went out.

“Can you tell us what you know about the virus, Professor?” Liz couldn't tell if she was awake, or if she was dreaming, but the memory of the TV broadcast she had watched was vivid in her mind. If she was asleep, her body was being held upright by the people crushed against her.

“Certainly,” the bearded professor said. It wasn't an ungainly array of facial hair. Instead his beard was neatly trimmed to match his immaculate hair. “The Nosferatu virus, as the public are wanting to call it, spreads via bodily fluids and in the air we breathe.”

“So, it's airborne?” the TV show host interrupted.

There was a hint of annoyance in the professor's face, as if the question was too stupid to even comprehend. “Yes. It is highly durable, capable of surviving on most surfaces. It's main mode of transmission is respiratory, but it also has the ability to infect the skin and mucous membranes.”

“Is there any way to tell if anyone is infected?”

“Not in the early stages, no. The symptoms are very mild at first, going unnoticed in most people. In the latter stages, fever and joint pain are common, as is sensitivity to light. It usually takes around three days for these to develop.”

“What about being bitten?” enquired the host, to which the professor seemed to brighten as if the question excited him.

“Ah, that is a totally different scenario. Bites infect the host much quicker.”

“I'm sorry...the host?”

“The person bitten,” the professor said, now visibly irritated by the idiot he was sharing the broadcast with. “Those bitten will change much quicker. The saliva of Homo Vampirous acts almost like a catalyst to spread the infection through the victim's system.”

“So, we are definitely stating that the virus mutates people into a new species?”

“I wouldn't use the word mutate, and you must remember, it is only the males of our species that undergo the change.”

“Are women immune to the virus then?”

“Don't be ridiculous,” the professor said before he caught himself. He forced a smile onto his lips. “For women, the virus is debilitating, occasionally lethal. But the lack of a Y chromosome means they do not become converted. Instead, they seem to become the most sought-after food of the Virals.”

“Have there been no reports of any female vampires?”

“No, none that I am aware of.” A murmuring could be heard in the audience watching the broadcast.

“Is there any word on a cure, Professor?”

“A cure? There is not, and there will never be a cure.”

“That's a frightening statement, Professor.” The audience seemed to agree.

“Frightening but true. It infects and spreads too rapidly. Many of the facilities researching the virus have already been overrun.”

“We've had reports that the CDC centre of operations in Atlanta has been lost.”

“Indeed,” the Professor said sadly. “That was one of the first research hubs to fall to the virus.”

“For our listening audience, Professor, what advice do you have on how to deal with this present emergency?” The professor dipped his head slightly, before looking directly into the camera.

“Pray.”

Liz was ripped from her thoughts by the lurching of the train, the brakes

clearly being applied. She wouldn't say she was comfortable with the stench around her, but she had acclimated to it. Looking at her watch, she saw that she had been on her feet for over twelve hours. Her calves were sore and threatening to spasm. Ruby had been spared most of it. Being in the corner, there had been just enough room for the child to sit on the cold metal ground, her knees held against her chest by defensive arms. It was only when the blinding lights erupted back into life that Liz got to see how uncomfortable her daughter looked. Tired and petrified eyes looked back up at her, and Liz thrust a hand down for her daughter, who eagerly took it.

The train lurched again, finally coming to a stop. There was hushed silence in the carriage, the uncertainty of what awaited everyone weighing on them. What would they find when the doors finally opened? Was this really the safety that was promised? Above her head, the air conditioning buzzed, bringing fresh oxygen to those who were close to giving up altogether. There were over a hundred people in here with Liz, but she had no idea how many were on the train in total.

The door to freedom finally opened and a wail of relief surged through the people like a wave. Without being told, the women started to unload themselves, the pressing on Liz gradually easing. She had already decided to wait and be the last one out. If there was terror rather than sanctuary out there, she wanted to spare her daughter that for as long as possible.

Liz already knew in her heart that this wasn't a rescue, but she kept this certainty from her daughter.

Not all the women got off the train. As the masses unloaded themselves, some bodies fell to the floor. Some might have just fainted, but others were clearly dead, the trip and the trauma too much for them. Standing firm in the corner, Liz waited until everyone who could exit did so, a dozen still forms left behind.

“Do we go now?” Ruby enquired.

“In a moment, honey.” Liz had an expectation of what happened next, and she wasn't disappointed. She remembered what her grandmother, a survivor of Belsen, had told her.

“Once the trains were emptied, the Kapos would enter to clear away the dead bodies. They would pile them up outside the train, the mounds piling high with the numbers being transported.”

The words ended in her mind, just as people started to climb aboard. Liz stepped forward hesitantly. She expected to be told off by these new arrivals,

but at most, she got a blank stare. Dressed as they were in orange jump suits, these people looked like prisoners. It was also hard to miss that they were all females.

Liz knew she couldn't stay here any longer.

“Come on, honey,” Liz urged her daughter, who was now standing. She pulled on Ruby's arm harder than she needed to which got a squeal of complaint. “We can't stay here.”

When she reached the open door, Liz realised her prospects outside the train weren't much improved. She saw a similar set up to the previous station, except the wire mesh tunnels leading away from this platform were all colour coded. A loudspeaker voice was telling them to leave the platform by their designated colour, each carriage arranged so that it was matched up to the correct tunnel.

Liz could see that each tunnel led into an array of long tents, and she stepped down from the train, arms held up for Ruby to jump into. As weary as she was, she didn't lower her daughter to the ground, the arms snaking around her neck as the child tried to get some sort of comfort from the only person who could protect her. *Protect?* Liz knew she could do nothing for her daughter now, not in that regard. Warily, she joined the back of the line to her tunnel.

There were more women in orange jump suits inside the tents, but no men were visible. There didn't need to be, because there were surveillance cameras covering every inch and every interaction that could occur in here. Several of the new arrivals tried to converse with those in orange, but every attempt at an interaction was ignored.

“At first some of the Kapos tried to help as many as they could, but that soon stopped when the punishments were meted out. There were too many amongst them willing to sell out their own kind just for an extra ration of mouldy bread.” Liz wondered if this was the case here. She knew others were having the same thoughts, but most of the women would still be clinging onto the hope that this was the salvation that had been promised—even as they took off their clothes per the instructions on the signs arrayed around the tent. Even as they walked forward naked, queuing up for the showers that awaited them.

There was no resistance.

Liz had no illusions, and she followed the instructions in numb disbelief. Ruby protested at being made to strip naked, but Liz persisted until her child relented. Being at the back now seemed like the worst idea possible. If something bad was to happen, better to have it over with quickly. This was a

scene Liz thought had been retired to the horrors of history. How could it be made any worse but for the next tent to contain showers?

It made no sense though. The holocaust that almost saw the extermination of European Jews had been a prolonged event brought on by forces that had taken years to rise to power. And there was no discrimination here. Every religion imaginable was likely represented. Only there was a different type of segregation. Everyone now walking to the showers was the female of the species.

“I don't want to, Mummy,” Ruby begged. Liz knew the only choice was to keep moving forward, so she pressed her child onwards. She felt resigned to her fate. She could have screamed; could have ripped at her own flesh, but that wouldn't have helped anyone. If anything, it might have set some of the others off, and there was no telling what might have happened then.

Last in line, Ruby and Liz stepped through into the shower area.

Surely, they weren't about to be put to death. It would have been much easier just to have killed them all at the railway station or in their homes. Above her, the shower heads loomed. A temporary affair by the look of it; likely something used for soldiers in the field. Catching a sound, Liz threw a harried glance behind her, the tent flaps being closed by one of the orange-clad minions. Just in that briefest moment, Liz made eye contact--utter sorrow and regret looking back at her.

I know what is about to happen to you, those eyes said. But there is nothing I can do to help you.

Liz wasn't to know that the tent flaps now made an airtight seal. This tented area was big enough to house everyone from the red carriages. There would be similar set ups for those of a different colour, Liz imagined, and she wasn't wrong in that regard. Holding her daughter tight to her midriff, Liz waited for the icy water to descend. Experience told her there would be no heated shower here.

She was right, but there wasn't any water either. As the invisible gas began to fill the air around her, Liz knew her worst fears were confirmed. Before anyone had a chance to panic, people began to fall to the ground as the effects of the gas worked quickly. The last thought Liz had before unconsciousness took her was that she had failed her daughter.

When Liz woke up, she was no longer naked. That was the only good thing about her situation. She was wearing a jump suit with some thin and feeble

slippers perched on her feet. But this jump suit wasn't orange; it was red. She was lying on a mattress that had been placed on the floor of a wire-walled cell that was three metres by three metres. The ground underneath her and the back wall were concrete, with a chemical toilet the only other thing in her enclosure.

It took her several seconds to realise there was a cannula in the back of her hand.

“What the ...?”

Because the walls of her cell were made of thick wire, she could see other cells aligned along both sides of a wooden walkway. The whole scene was illuminated by bright florescent strips above. By the looks of things, she was the first person to wake up.

Where the hell was her daughter?

“Ruby?” she screamed at the top of her lungs. “Ruby, can you hear me?” The only answer was the delayed sound of a door opening and a pounding in her skull.

As in the tents, it was obvious that she, and everyone imprisoned here, was under constant surveillance. Whatever this place was, it had been built specifically for the purpose of holding the people now trapped here.

Footsteps wandered toward her, their owner probably drawn by her evident transgression. Not knowing what was about to transpire, Liz cowered against the rear wall of her cell, the cold of the concrete eating quickly through her clothing.

“Keep away from me,” she warned. Still, the footsteps came closer, the angulation of the wire cages slowly showing the tall man who was approaching. Before he was fully in her sight, she knew who it was, her heart dropping even further into despair. She should have been elated, but she knew there would be no rescue here.

“John?”

“Hi babe,” her husband said, stopping outside her cage. He fiddled with the padlock that kept the door to her cage firmly closed. Liz felt the last of her resolve melt from her.

“Oh, John.”

“I'm really sorry about this, Liz,” John said. Only it wasn't John anymore-- the eyes told her that. White and lifeless; the eyes she had seen so many times on the TV. He hadn't died. He had become infected. She watched as a ripple flowed through him, and he gripped the wire, fingers flexing to show long talons where fingernails had once been. “You really don't want to know how much I

want to be in there with you.”

“Where's Ruby, John?” Liz begged.

“Ah, yes, the child. Such a sweet thing.”

“Please, John.”

“Don't worry, we haven't hurt her. Not yet, anyway. It really is good to see you, though.” She could see the way he was looking at her. There was no love there, just pure animal hunger.

“What have you done to her?”

“Me? Trust me, I haven't been allowed anywhere near her. Which is for the best because the temptation to rip her entrails out and feast would have been too great.” John's eyes kept scanning the wire as if he was trying to find a way to get in at her. “Normally they don't let us in here, but we are allowed just this once.”

“We?”

“You really don't understand, do you?”

“No, and I don't care. All I want is to be able to see Ruby.” She would give her life for just five minutes with her only child.

“You will if you behave. You will have lots of me time. But most of your days will be spent here, in this cell. I hope you get to know your neighbours.” John actually laughed at that.

“I don't understand.”

“Well, I suppose I'd better do the whole villain thing,” John said, mocking her. There was a harshness to his voice as if he'd smoked forty a day all his life. The skin around his face was taut with evidence of weight loss, the cheeks sunken in. This was definitely John's body. Liz just didn't know the person who occupied it. “You will notice the cannula in the back of your hand,” John said. Liz fingered it, fighting a strong temptation to rip it out.

“What are you?”

“You know what I am, Liz, and don't interrupt. Being close to you like this pains me.” He inhaled deeply, savouring the odour that seeped from her body. “I can hear your heart beating, your blood pulsing. Never have you been more desirous to me than you are right now.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Why, your blood of course,” John said. “Every other day, one of those orange bitches will come in here and extract some. We will take enough so as to just keep you alive. I'm hungry, you see, and I have a voracious appetite.”

“But you're my husband.”

“So they say, but if I'm honest, I barely remember you. But we are married, so you have been assigned to me as my property.”

“Assigned?” The word didn't seem to make sense.

“Yes, Liz. I am going to feed off you. I reckon you will be good for a few years. And when you are finally nothing more than a dried-up husk, you will be replaced by Ruby.”

“No, you can't do this.”

“Of course, we can. This is happening all across the country, Liz. The women are being rounded up to be farmed. So much easier than hunting you all down, and this way we keep the stock from getting ravaged.”

“We aren't *animals!*” Liz said defiantly.

“Oh, but you are. Juicy cattle, ripe for the bleeding. Be thankful you were married to me. Many of those who aren't attached to a surviving vampire are sent off to be breeding stock. There are so many of us now. We need to keep the farms stocked.” *Farms?* Was this what this place was? “Those too old or infertile, well, we have our fun with them.” The grin on his face was manic.

“But the women in orange?” How could they walk about so freely? John actually shivered in disgust.

“There are some of you who taste vile to us. They were given a choice. Work their lives away or be given to our more sadistic brothers.”

“But why do I get such special treatment?”

“Because you are mine. Your daughter is mine. Hell, I might even stick another baby in you just to keep my family going.”

“I'll kill you if you come near me,” Liz warned.

“No, you won't. You will be my pet until I tire of you. And then you will be given to the dogs to devour.” Liz didn't know it, but John wasn't referring to the canine of the species. The majority of males descended further than others into a savage, rabid-like creature. “You are lucky really. There aren't that many vampires who retained their cognitive abilities. If not for me, things could have gone so much worse for you.” John stepped back from the wire. “Here, you will be fed twice a day. You might not find the taste to your liking, but the food is designed for maximum blood output. And you will eat it because your daughter's well-being hangs in the balance.”

“Don't you feel anything for me?” Liz knew if she could just somehow get through to him.

“You are *food*, Liz. The sooner you realise that, the sooner you will come to love your new home.”

“Go fuck yourself!” Liz screamed, which woke some of her fellow prisoners. Their muffled voices seemed to agitate John.

“I’ll see you soon, Liz. We’ll catch up and talk about the old times. But in the meantime, don’t go running off.” John turned and strode out the way he had come.

Liz wanted to show more defiance; to hurl abuse after him in the hope that he would tear the door off her cage and rip her throat out. But that would be selfish. She had a daughter somewhere in this facility that she needed to try and protect. And if that meant Liz had to endure and suffer for decades so that John would keep his hands off Ruby, then that was exactly what she would do.

A mother’s love could endure many things...but could it endure that?

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