

Doctor Brian Sherman woke that morning feeling the same as he did the previous night; tired and worn out. He knew the psychological definition of an obsession and part of his mind was coldly analyzing his situation and telling him that he had begun to neglect his classes and even shunned the company of the rest of the faculty. No good can come of this wall he was building to shut everyone out. As always, the rest of his mind replied "Unless I'm successful."

He rolled out of bed, amid the mess of his bedroom, another horror not getting any better since he'd been forgoing the myriad of daily menial tasks required of a bachelor. Dragging himself into the bathroom to give himself a cursory appraisal.... at least the beard was finally coming in. Shaving was overrated anyway. He changed into some reasonably clean clothes and wandered into the kitchen. Light was already streaming through the windows, but there had been another power outage during the night and all the clocks were reset. Mechanically, he checked his wrist but realized that his watch had broken weeks ago. It didn't matter. He didn't worry about making it to the campus on time anymore. Although he'd been neglecting his classes, so had his students. Attendance was way down and it was a little worse every day. One day soon, he was going to walk into his first class of the day and it would be empty. A month ago that would have depressed him. Now he would feel relief as that would give him more time for his project.

The faculty all thought he was crazy. Other people were working on it. The top minds in the country.... the top minds of all countries were working on it. They had the best equipment and were the finest in their field. They would find the answer. They had to. Brian was just pushing himself for no reason, and anyway if they couldn't do it, what chance did he have?

But he couldn't stop. He was close to an answer. He knew he was. He couldn't prove it. All his tests had so far proven failures, but it was something he felt. He glanced down at a discarded paper from three days ago. Three days seemed like forever now and two months The headline read: "Plague kills millions" He smiled slightly. Even the papers had given up trying to be creative. Today, the death toll might have topped ten million, who knows? After the first ten million, there was no reliable way to count the dead, but estimates were over 500 million dead since the first one. Of course that was worldwide, but the total dead was more than all the people in the United States. There had been panic before; riots in the street, religious nut cases telling anyone who would listen that the end of the world was here, the usual craziness that normally crops up during a crisis, only times several thousand. Two months into it the REAL problems started: mass migrations away from infected areas, refugees from New York moving west to Pennsylvania and Illinois. The entire city of Atlanta evacuated when the plague swept down the coast, but by then cases were cropping up all over the country. New York had obviously been the first entry point in the US, but it wasn't the only one. Soon there was no place to run to.

Brian thought about coffee, but then remembered he had taken his coffee and his coffee pot into the lab at work. It didn't matter. These days caffeine didn't seem to help anyway. His car was almost out of gas, but he didn't bother to stop. The man who ran the station near Brian's house was gone more often than he was in. The threat of arrest still kept people from breaking in and stealing gas, but with the police thinning out all the time, Brian wondered how long that would last. It wouldn't surprise him if crime was already way up, but at least the local news stopped caring about trivial things like that long ago.

Ironically, after a while things seemed to almost turn around. After the initial panic that some days killed more than the plague did in its first few weeks, fear gave way to denial and acceptance. There was always the fear that it would hit close to home, and if you didn't get out right away... and sometimes even if you did... you would be dead within a couple days. A few small towns went completely crazy as some wonderful examples of the worst of society tried to kill everyone who was

infected.... or suspected of being infected, but in places where the plague hadn't hit yet things almost looked normal if you could ignore the fact that everyone was either staying home in fear or had long since left to try to reach their families or friends or loved ones. News from abroad was becoming spotty but had not yet ceased altogether. When someone heard of the plague hitting a place where they had friends or family, sometimes they would just leave. Brian never saw them again. Many of the faculty had disappeared that way. Others just stopped coming. At least one had killed himself. No one really knew why, but Brian could guess. His whole family had been in New York. They didn't make it out.

Pulling into the staff parking lot, Brian noticed a couple of cars missing, but that didn't mean their drivers were too. Gas was becoming expensive as deliveries weren't as reliable as they were. Running out of gas was a frequent problem even if you had the money, but some who were fortunate enough to live close to the campus had opted to give up their cars altogether. \$10 a gallon was a good incentive. Brian laughed quietly. There was a silver lining everywhere, he thought. There was a news report last week that Los Angeles had the cleanest air quality since they had begun keeping a record. Then he remembered that nothing had been heard from Los Angeles in three days. It didn't necessarily mean the city had become a victim, but that was how it happened.

Rebecca Edwards met him at the administration building. He smiled and waived, even though his heart wasn't really in it.

"Johnson told me to tell you that you're fired." she said.

Brian didn't even pause. This was the fourth time Johnson had sacked him.

"Johnson won't fire me." he said as she fell into step beside him. "He won't fire anyone who still comes to work."

"Except you don't work."

"Sure I do," he said, knowing what she meant and deliberately mishearing her.

"I mean classes."

"You mean I still have students? Woohoo."

The "woohoo" had nothing behind it. It was amusing banter, designed to keep their spirits up, but neither one of them was buying it now. It had become a formality lately, and even the occasional laugh was without humor.

Our souls are dying before our bodies, Brian thought.

"Tell Johnson that he can stop paying me if he likes, but I'll keep coming to work and babysit the lab, unless he wants to have security throw me out."

Rebecca smiled. Security had given up a long time ago. For a while, Johnson tried to deputize faculty and even students to do the job, but after a while, there didn't seem to be any point.

"You know what we all think of what you're doing." she said, and Brian nodded.

"Your chances of finding a cure are slim, and your chances of finding a cure before the system comes down is practically zero. There are a few of us stocking supplies and stuff here. We're using the physics lab at the moment. Can you tear yourself away from your hobby for about ten minutes later today? I'd like to go over a few things with you."

That stopped Brian. Has it gotten that bad already? Was he already out of time?

"I'll try." he said, but he honestly didn't think he would. His mind was already racing, trying to think of ways to speed up his work. He was working recklessly fast already, disregarding quite a few scientific procedures.

Odd, he thought. *A moment ago I couldn't even be bothered to laugh.*

Going through the motions of everyday life had perhaps shielded him from what was going on beyond his immediate presence. It was good that Rebecca and the others were getting ready, but he had no time to spare for them.