

Malady

by Ray Nessly

When the malady struck and the world fell dark at noon, she and I groped the walls and found our front door. Outside, bewildered, we heard the whine of jets in free-fall, explosions in the imagined distance. And we heard a car — or was it a truck that veered into the ditch across the street? On its side, wheels spinning, we guessed because we could hear them rattle and squeak.

Heard the driver too, begging for help. Poor soul, screaming, right there in front of our eyes: trapped in fire and twisted metal, we feared, but could not see. Because the malady had blinded us by sealing our eyes closed.

This strange new darkness. Like the hand of God had sutured our eyelids and left us nothing but to wonder . . . *why?*

I took her arm and she mine to wander the streets, blind. Nothing stirred. Everybody gone. Why?

We remembered hearing, the day before, the sound of a blade on wood. A neighbor chopping firewood, next door. We searched his yard, our arms groping the blackness, until I tripped on the axe. We broke into houses with it. Storefronts. Hoarded every last weapon, bottle, match, tin.

Windows open, all that winter long, we took turns sleeping, the other listening for trouble.

And now it's spring. And last week — or was it longer ago? —you found us. She and I, hiding. From survivors. Fellow blinded survivors. All because we had imagined you to be more savage than ourselves.

And now she's dying because I botched it.

Gave her too much to drink to dull the pain. Too much ice on her eyes. She couldn't guide my hands, couldn't cry out when I slashed her eyelids open, couldn't warn me I'd gone too deep with the blade.

There's only one way.

You, with your hand on my shoulder. Spare me your empathy. Spare me the alcohol; spare me the last of the mountain ice. Grope this place, would you? Find me the box cutter and hand it to me.

Now I take the same hands and blade that infected her, that truly blinded her. This time, I'll know exactly where, and how hard, to press. Because it's my sense of touch that's doing the guiding. And it's my eye.

Later, when my wounds heal and the pain subsides, take my arm, one of you. I'll show you the packets of seeds amid the store shelves in their scavenged hundreds. We'll go to the field, together. And I'll show you — show all of you — where to dig. Where to empty your buckets of water. Where the field is free of shadow from morning onto dusk.

