

The Progeny

by Stephen Heger

1

I looked through the window of the drive-thru into the customers vehicle. There, encased in a ton of metal and plastic, sat a balding, rotund man in his mid-forties with flesh that resembled cookie dough sprinkled with beads of sweat. Not only did he defy physics by fitting behind the wheel, but his car seemed to be the dumping ground and final destination for a junk food black hole. Burger King bags, two-liter soda bottles, chip bags and candy wrappers, all empty, littered the vehicle and gave me a tinge of claustrophobia coupled with nausea just by looking at it. I pressed the intercom button.

"Welcome to Rite Aid, how are you doing today?"

"I'm here to pick up my prescriptions", he said in an unusually high-pitched voice without a 'hi' or 'hello'. His breathing was labored and heavy. I despised him instantly.

"Who is it for?", I asked.

"Me.", he responded in all seriousness.

I took in a deep breath, held it for a second, let it out and thought to myself that it can't be possible for someone to be such a simpleton. It bears to reason that he not only shouldn't be driving, but it also makes me wonder how he ties his fucking shoes in the morning. I used to think that people of his caliber were the exception to the rule. I tried giving them the benefit of the doubt but after working in this pharmacy for six months I have realized he is in the majority. I used to have just a general dislike and disdain for people before I started working here, now I just want to see them utterly destroyed.

"I need a name, please.", I said.

"Oh yeah, right, I guess you do. Peter Harvey. That's H-A-R-", I jabbed at the button to turn off the intercom like a fencer trying to repeatedly strike a killing blow. I felt the muscles spasm in my right forearm, my right upper thigh and on the back of my neck. No matter how often it happens, I can never quite get used to it. The cysts sat right under my skin and they began moving again.

I turned around and gazed over the pharmacy and wondered what the hell I was doing here. The employees (I'll never use the word associate) were lined up behind the counter, head down, and played their part in the assembly line. Trish was at the drop-off window followed by Anahita doing the counting and our pharmacy manager, Laura, doing the final count and check and looking like she was about to burst into tears.

Again.

As usual.

The line at the register was six people thick so I threw out an "I'll be with you in a moment." in their general direction and went to the rows and rows, floor to ceiling, of prescriptions lining the walls. Heart medications, bowel movers, pain relievers, proton pump inhibitors, mood stabilizers, blood thinners, and erectile dysfunction drugs all cozy in their little bottles and gift-wrapped in a Monaco bag. Everything lined up alphabetically with the over-sized sitting at the extreme bottom. I don't believe in karma, but if I did, I must be a very, *very* bad man.

I pulled the party pack of prescriptions for the heart-attack-waiting-to-happen and went back to the drive-thru. Let's see what we have here: an ACE inhibitor, Beta blockers, coumadin, some lactulose to blow all the shit out and a little methylphenidate for

dessert. I totaled it up on the register and after seeing the five dollars and fifty cents show on the monitor I felt the spasm in my thigh morph into a throbbing pain. Motherfucker. This guy is on government assistance for being a fat bastard and I *work* at a pharmacy and can't even afford prescription insurance. I don't have a problem with the government assistance, mind you. It's that it's completely wasted on this mountain of adipose tissue. I liken it to using a fire extinguisher to put out a forest fire. I look back at him as his chest heaves under the stress and the sweat beading on his doughy flesh and I thought how wonderful it would be to alter his dosages. Increase his blood thinners to toxic levels so the veins were as delicate as the skin on a tomato. I envisioned his frail, paper thin vessels exploding as he is shoved down a flight of stairs. Each jarring bump erupting more arteries as he thuds and thumps down each painful step, finally landing at the foot of the stairs. The crescendo being his head cracking against that last step. I imagine an intracerebral bleed and a mound of sobbing, broken bones and non-congealing blood in a bag of skin bleeding out internally.

"Your total is five dollars and fifty cents", I barked into the intercom and extended the mechanical drawer.

He dropped in a hundred dollar bill and followed it with, "Did you use my discount card?"

"Yes.", I lied, as I rang him up and sent him on his way.

Next.

Each customer that came through the drive-thru was a pain in the ass if not only for the fact that they couldn't get out of their vehicles and use their legs to actually walk into the store. People trying to talk to me with their windows rolled up. A pack of six yipping Yorkies and an owner that thinks it's the cutest fucking thing ever.

The stories would be hilarious if they happened to someone else.

We processed three hundred prescriptions a day under constant video surveillance. Day in and day out, this was all typical. Patterned.

Neverending.

Hell.

The customers, the directives from corporate and the incessant chatter of my fellow drones followed by my impotent fantasies of revenge were my routine. Maybe it wasn't hell, but a waking, real-life purgatory that is stuck on some sort of play-back loop. A limbo where you don't live and you don't die. Just a flat-lined existence where you hope the end is at least less painless than the life you've been living.

2

I woke up the next morning and felt the usual stretching of the skin from the cysts with the accentuation being at the base of my neck. The consistent pressure accompanied by that unmistakable itchiness foreshadowed the burgeoning growths underneath. I reached my hand back, palpated the area, and felt a series of four to five bumps just below the skin. They ranged in size from that of a pea to that of a grape and clustered around the end of my hairline, right above my shoulders, and directly over my spine. Like a phrenologist, my fingers glided over them, poking and prodding, trying to make some sort of sense of not only their location, but also any type of hidden meaning that might lie in their location and size. I was left with the same feeling as I had always had and that was that I was being consumed from the inside out by my own bodily growths.

I prepared some toast, got a cup of coffee and added a jigger or two of Irish Cream and got myself prepared for the day as usual. This amounted to nothing more than shitting, showering and shaving although not necessarily in that order. For some reason though, today I paused after I stepped out of the shower and stared at myself in the mirror. Little beads of water cascaded down my body and in that moment, I had to shake off a shudder of revulsion. Scars littered my body from head to toe from the hundred or so incisions I had made and stitched closed with my rudimentary skills. Though I had gotten better, it seemed impossible to hide the little white nicks that littered my body. I had gotten used to what reflected back but, for some reason today, I saw myself how others might see me. Most people would dismiss me simply as a cutter. If they only knew the truth. It's much more deliciously vulgar and intricate than that. The scars were speckled in between tattoos of a varied sort. Tentacles began at my shoulder, encircled and wrapped themselves around my arms and ended at the elbow. On my right forearm was a tribute to Lovecraft: Dagon bursting out of the ocean and Cthulhu rising, massive in the background. The left still bare, a canvas waiting to be painted. My legs were littered with rudimentary icons that I had done myself. Skulls and flames and my revulsion for religion permanently emblazoned in shoddy work. I leaned into the mirror and stared at myself closely. Heavier, grayer, and older than the day before. What a fucking disgrace.

3

The employees I worked with were a hybrid of harpies and gorgons with a flair for hypocrisy and misery. The mythological beasts had somehow been resurrected, shot through time, applied to, and all got hired at my particular store where I had the unfortunate luck to also work. They weaved their vapid viciousness in between dispensing pharmaceuticals and falling in and out of panic attacks. The incessant screeching that ranged from endless recounts of shopping adventures to find the 'most excellent ever'

windbreaker or necklaces for the pharmacy managers little dog named Pickles. Before he came to this plane of existence I'm sure the little shit was named Cerberus. It was only biding its time before it's true form would be revealed.

Backstabbing and ass-kissing were the top priority between talking about how many Xanax they had to take the previous day just to make it through work. I loathed these people I worked with. There was no brotherhood in our misery and if I ever tried to steer a conversation to something, anything, other than what was the empty topic of the day, I would be treated like I had leprosy. Vacuous reality shows, hollywood blockbusters and the latest in movie star and political sound-bites was all that ever poured from their mouths. It made my skin crawl. Literally. I'd make a bet that the people who worked in the pharmacy were some of its most loyal customers.

4

I'm not sure exactly when they first started manifesting. Maybe, and this is a guess, about three or four years ago I noticed little white pustules begin to form under the skin that would grow randomly and then recede back to unimportance. They would flare up arbitrarily wherever, and initially, I thought, whenever, they felt like. Usually forming in clusters, they seemed irrelevant. I thought they were pimples or some sort of minor skin malady that could be allayed with better shampoo or soap or some other product. All of it came to no avail and I would just roll with them as they really are nothing more than first world problems, at best. It took me a while to correlate the level of my stress to that of the growths. It took a particularly horrendous weekend with my then wife to realize that they were interrelated. The morning after a particularly explosive argument we had there were several painful flare-ups in no less than four places in my body. It was like all the viciousness, dislike, and contempt I have for everything and everyone began to pool and collect over time into random areas of my body. Sub-cutaneous cysts

of hatred and loathing nurturing and growing under my skin. The older I became and the more I interacted with people the quicker they grew and, on top of that, it would take longer to recede. My newfound *career* was one of several bothersome areas in my life that seemed to trigger these instances. The list that provoked these outbreaks was long, but religion and politicians seeming to round out the top three. So, they grew and grew inside me. I had become a poor mans Joseph Merrick.

I had to completely cut myself off from the barrage of the outside world. I had no cable, I refused to listen to the radio and I read no newspapers. I had no online presence and yet the outside world seemed to consistently encroach into my private world. I could feel the skin tighten to the point of bursting listening to the harpies talk about their plans for Earth Day while about to give birth to their fourth child. The neighbors dogs barking and barking incessantly for hours while they somehow ignored the cacaphony. I wish those things would die. Customers coming in wishing me happy holidays while their repressive religions launched hate campaigns against other repressive religions and gays and women and minorities. The posting of memes, sports, Jersey anything, politicians, the Kardashians, occupy protests and, well, I said it was a long list. To this day, I have never understood how we, as a species, have evolved as far as we have. It had to be a few hundred that have propelled us while millions have played the part of the anti-progressive anchor. I also know that I have not contributed a whole lot, but I don't think I have retarded the process either. I don't think I qualify as one of those that the warning labels on plastic bags were conceived for. So I did everything I could do to become a modern day hermit. At least as much of one as the current societal restrictions would allow. It did not work. The growths kept coming. So I started to drink heavily to try and medicate myself. I did it consistently before, now it became religious. I couldn't end my life abruptly but I could kill myself as fast as I could from the inside out. I just hoped I could last

long enough to see the New Roman Empire crumble.

5

"Edward, I need to speak to you back in the managers office when it's convenient for you.", Laura, my manager, said to me when I came in for my shift.

I'd grown accustomed to the 'talks' and was always prepared for being written up and/or fired. I understood the contract between me and Rite Aid and it was this: Do exactly as we say, even if we, the corporation, your lifeblood for paying your bills, haven't said it, and know that everyday you should be in fear that you are an easily replaceable cog in a bloated and diabolical machine.

"Okay, let's go then.", I said sharply.

"Not yet. We're busy."

"Then why did you bother saying 'convenient for me'? *You* tell me when *you* have the time to meet me in the office.", I said as I punched in my employee number and put on my lab coat. My tone broke her from her work.

She stopped what she was doing and turned toward me. "Do you have an issue, Edward?"

"Yes. The fact that I now have to work my day knowing that, at your convenience, you will either be reprimanding me, writing me up, or firing me and that you know that too."

"I was just letting you know that I needed to talk to you and you have a problem with that?"

"Are you not listening to me? It's not that you need to talk to me. It's the fact that you knowingly alluded to some bad thing coming my way and will more than likely wait until your shift ends which is in about another five hours or so. Now I get to try and *not* think about what you have to say-"

"The office. Now.", she said in her best, angry, mother voice.

She slammed down the prescription bottle and took off towards the back stockroom.

"This will only take a moment.", she said to the technicians. They glared at me for having infuriated their matriarch and I smiled back as widely as I could, did a little Princess Diana wave, and followed Laura.

Her curly, clown-like afro danced atop her head as her thin, sexless frame meandered through the aisles of wares, through the double doors and into the office. I followed as slowly as I could without seeming like I was. My insolence began to give way to the aforementioned fear of losing my job, my house, and my way of life I had become accustomed to.

"Sit.", She said. "Not including whatever-that-was in the pharmacy, we've had a complaint from a customer about you.", she said as she slid over a form that had way, *way* too much writing on it. I felt the itching and clawing beneath my skin again. This time I welcomed it like the scratching of a tattoo needle or the relief of scratching through a scab.

"Okay, and-?", I replied.

"Read it.", she said sternly.

I scanned it, flipping through the two pages and the short of it was that I was rude to a customer and supposedly didn't order an item that had been asked for. I fucking hate customers.

"Okay.", I said as I flipped it closed. I knew the routine but was going to have her spell it out for me.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself? Wait. Forget that. You have the opportunity to reply on the back.", she said as she flipped the stapled pages. Her thin finger, adorned with some ridiculous butterfly painted on the nail, pointed to the five unfilled lines on the back. "Do you need an extra piece of paper?"

"Nope.", I stated tersely.

I grabbed a pen from the desk, flipped to the back page and wrote 'I ordered the item. The rest is true.' and handed it back to her.

"There you go. Can I get back to work now?"

"No. We need to discuss the steps you will take to rectify this. How can you present yourself to the customers to show your appreciation for their shopping here at Rite Aid?"

I just stared at her. I didn't have an answer. I just imagine me jumping up with a speed and precision that defied my size, placing my palms on the sides of her temple and staring at her, our eyes locking for the briefest of moment. In that blink of an eye, that millisecond, I see in her eyes her realization that she will not make it out of here alive. She begins to struggle. Her hands clamp around my wrists and her legs begin to flail like a spastic. My resolve to see her end becomes more determined as her mouth opens into a scream and my thumbs slowly press into her eye sockets. I feel her struggling beneath my size and hear the sounds of her screams, loud and piercing. Her eyes resist, bulge, and pop out of their sockets as

my thumbs delve deeper and deeper into the fleshy soft tissue. Little trickles of blood cascade down he face like crimson tears as her body struggles less and twitches more. I rotate my thumbs in the cavernous holes in her head until her body is completely stopped. The air is thick with the heady aroma of iron, piss, and shit. I withdraw my thumbs with the sickest of sucking sounds, slap her across her face and wipe my bloody hands on her smock.

“Are you even paying attention?”

My daydream abattoir disappeared and I aqueoused to my reality. I pause for a moment and say, “Yes. Yes, I do.”. My shoulders slump and I repeat all the positive rhetoric pumped into my head since joining the institution. Words like ‘respect’ and ‘patience’ and variations on the theme dropped from my mouth lifelessly and apathetically.

Though I was defeated in the end, my mind and my body was never more alive. The slithering was at a fever pitch and the movement underneath felt like electricity surging through my body and limbs. Something big was gonna happen.

6

I had seen a physician about them at one point early on. There was that little voice in the back of my head that screamed cancer, or tumor, even though I knew the chances were slim to none. I made my appointment, they did the obligatory ultrasound and concluded that they were simply benign cysts. Mutations that seemed natural to my body. I had the one just above my abdomen removed. Nothing to worry about I was told. I sat in the room after I got dressed and stared at the little jar with my name, identification number and date adorning the label. In the glass jar was a piece of me, floating, about the size of a pea. Little red tendrils grew from the nacreous mass. I

sat and stared at it for only a moment more and then with little debate, I pocketed it and left.

When I got home I must have stared at it for an hour. It hovered in the center of the fluid like a cloud on a windless day. For some reason I couldn't get over the fact that that was a piece of me in there. I rubbed my hands around my body and felt another five or six that could or should be removed and that's when it had hit me. For as many of these aliens that had infested my body, I would need to learn to remove them on my own.

It's rather simple once you figure it out and I learned to do it with a minimal amount of pain. Of course, that was wholly dependent on the size of the mass and its depth.

For the topical anaesthetic I would apply a combination of LMX and Orajel or Ambesol which is available over the counter at any drug store and works well. The scalpels and sutures can be purchased online from any medical supply warehouse and are very inexpensive compared to recurring doctor visits. In some cases, butterfly stitches would more than suffice. After the surgery was complete I would use a cream that contained bacitracin and polymyxin b and that seemed to work best as a topical antibiotic. A little slice of the skin, a gentle squeeze of the surrounding fleshy womb, and then done.

Like my relic from the first doctor visit, I would place the growths in old jars that were filled with a combination of formalin and saline and place them on the shelf in my closet. Every one of the jars had a replica label like my first visit to the doctor giving the date and time of excision.

I slowly amassed a sizable collection and every week or so would add another. There seemed to be no end to the amount my body

could produce and the collection I could amass.

7

The topic of discussion at work today was diet. This segued into and through intense exercise routines, fad diets, carbon footprints, organic foods and landed on genetically modified organisms. Also known as the devil's cornucopia to the uninformed masses. All I needed it to do was take the nose-dive into conspiracy theory and the misinformation festival would be complete. Anti-vaccination would be the cherry on top.

I constantly shook my head at the rhetoric that spewed from their gobs for the eternity of the conversation. I could feel a slow boil of subcutaneous activity the whole time. Right below the surface. Eight hours feels like forever.

It gives you cancer. It causes immune disorders. It accelerates aging. It kills bees and butterflies. It's the Adolph Hitler of ingestibles and creating a swathe of death and destruction through our bodies and the world. I piped up once or twice out of sheer frustration but I just kept getting that deep death stare over and over. They don't want anything to contradict what they have in their heads. Things like facts. It fucks their known world up and they can't process the idea that they could actually be wrong. If that is wrong, what else could they have been lied to about? So they stop the domino effect of critical thinking before it can even start.

I can't stand these people.

8

I remember the cyst that was the start of it all. It was on my right, outer thigh but very deep. It would be impossible for me to do on my

own. It was the kind daddy of them all and I felt it moving around when I lay in bed at night. A slow twisting under the skin as it grew and shifted in its place. I had known it was there for a very long time but had ignored it due to its depth and opting for the smaller ones. It was hard to discern its actual size due to the depth and the tissue around it but after the second, and only, doctor visit, it was roughly four inches in circumference or the size of a duck egg.

The physician ran through the same tests and the same spiel and all I wanted to do was get home with my new trophy. I sat there as giddy as a child on Christmas morning waiting to get my presents. There was the relief of having the cyst removed but it paled compared to the pleasure of being able to add such a large addition to my collection. The doctor left the room and, as before, I secreted the jar away in my jacket and left.

I drove home and immediately went into the closet and made room for my newest, permanent resident. It dwarfed everything I had removed and was unmistakably the cornerstone of my collection. I slid all of August 2011 to the left, September 2011 went to the right and placed it dead center and stared. I'm not sure how long I was standing there, watching its veiny tendrils dance in the fluid, it seemed that the other contents of the jars began to slowly make their way towards the larger center one. Bobbing and floating I could swear that their little tendrils moved slightly to assist them and propel them toward their larger kin. The one closest to the center seemed to press itself against the glass trying to reach the other part of him. I rotated the jar slightly which placed him on the opposite side of the jar. The little veins wiggled and wavered and carried the mass back to its brother. Back to the other side of the jar.

I slowly closed the cupboard door and was immobile. Dumbfounded and awestruck barely began to describe what my mind was going through. I logically knew that this was absurd. Impossible to say the least and even the mere idea of it was insane. Explanations for what I had seen flitted through my mind that

ranged from the aforementioned insanity to the fact that I have one of these growing inside my skull and pressing on my brain causing some sort of hallucination.

I opened the doors again, slowly and methodically with a just hint of reservation. Inside, every content of the smaller jars was pressed solidly against the glass in an attempt to reunite with its larger sibling. Well, if it was insanity I might as well just dive right in.

I immediately went to the kitchen and fumbled through the refrigerator and pulled out a Costco size jar of pickles and dumped the contents in the sink. I thoroughly cleaned the jar and headed back to the closet. I began unscrewing all of the jars and dumping all of the growths into the the king-daddy of jars starting with the newest and largest one. Bottle after bottle was dumped into the viscous solution with an almost religious fervor. After I had completed my task there was, in total, one hundred and thirteen bits of me floating in the very large jar. They swirled in the eddy of the dumped fluid and each one of them slowly sifted to the bottom and they sat there, unmoving.

A few minutes later their veiny red flagela began to slowly move. Little limbs began to pull and propel the bulky white bodies toward the center. The ones at the bottom pressed as hard as they could against the larger one while others began to crawl up and over the top of the others. Fighting for purchase, they clawed their way toward the center like so many spermatozoa fighting to be the one. When one would lose its grip, another quickly would take its place.

I stood there, mesmerized as the slow-motion flurry of activity continued.

By mid-afternoon the tendrils of the smaller ones had burrowed into the milky white mass of the larger one making it one interconnected cluster. Upon close inspection, it appeared that

several had actually been absorbed by the larger mass and existed only as nodules now. I moved the large jar into the living room of the house and set it on the coffee table. I reached for the phone, called in sick for tomorrow and grabbed a bottle of Pepe Lopez Tequila from the kitchen and sat there, mesmerized and taking shots as I watched my offspring form.

9

I woke the next morning with a thundering herd of horses attempting to bust through my skull. I sat up, keeping my eyes closed from the offending light, and ever so slowly sidled my way into the bathroom. I slid the drawer open and popped the lid off a bottle of ibuprofen and chased three of them down with a handful of cold water from the tap. I really need to stop drinking so much. That's what I told myself but, of course, it didn't really matter in the grand scheme of my life. In anybody's life. We are all gonna die one day, regardless of what we do to our body and what we put into it, why should it matter when? Even if you believe in the phallacies of a heaven, shouldn't it be so awesome that you should help usher in your own demise? Really, when I thought about it, there really wasn't anything to miss. Lights out and a dirt nap. I've come to terms with that. I mused a bit more while I threw on some shorts and tried tidying up the room a bit when it hit me.

The cysts.

I quickly went into the living room and looked immediately at the coffee table. The lid to the jar sat to its left, a trail of viscous liquid led off to the right and the jar was empty except the remaining fluid. At this point, it seemed my mind had thrown out any and all sense of the laws of reality. I knew what I was seeing was impossible but it was all too easy to accept at this point. I could still be drunk but it was more probable that the absurd was now the norm. I scoured the living room and saw nothing else amiss so I slowly tiptoed over to the coffee table and double-checked what my eyes were telling my brain I was seeing. Lid off, jar empty, trail of liquid. The trail of

liquid led off the table and was slowly dripping onto the carpet. The trail led into the den and ended at the cat door that led to the garage. Fuck. That was when I also remembered the cat door that led outside.

I tried convincing myself the whole thing was some sort of hallucination. That I had fashioned the whole thing and there never were any cysts, no doctor visits, no amateur bathroom surgeries. I had somehow concocted this whole thing and I truly was insane. For that I would have to question everything I could ever remember and that was just too much. The ruse became too vast and fell apart as quickly as it had been thought up. It was a matter of fact that, unfortunately, it had to be real. The trail led into the garage where it dried up.

If it got out through the cat door that ran through the door leading outside it was gone for good. Whatever it was. I opened the door and found nothing that could confirm nor deny it getting outside. I opted to scour the garage for hours looking for some idea of what could have happened to them. To it. I moved boxes and looked for little holes in the wall where it could have crawled. Or slithered. Walked maybe? All to no avail. I straightened the garage back up, microwaved a cup of coffee and sat on a folding chair in the garage. I smoked one cigarette after another glancing this way and that. Wishing. Hoping to find it. I gave up after several hours and went back in to bed. My head began to hurt again and I was tired. So fucking tired.

10

Days turned to weeks. No matter what I did it sat in the back of my mind. The creature, my shade, was somewhere out there and it bugged the hell out of me. But, like everything else in life, if you give it enough time, it starts to fade from memory. Lost pets and old

loves, family members you met three times, and the one person you were going to be friends with forever. You slowly forget them in pieces. First it's their faces, once crisp and easy to recognize, giving way to cloudier and cloudier visages. Sided-by-side with this, you begin to forget how they laughed, the old fights and the make-up sex, until eventually they've been cataloged away in the recesses of your brain. Every once in a while, a memory slices through everything and a moment comes back but it's not all there. A time and a place you once felt but there's only a ghost of an image of who it belonged to.

So, it was back to life and work interspersed with with drinking and playing the role of hermit. I tried using painting and writing as I had in the past as some sort of relief, but my muse was dead and bloated. A pasty white corpse that had chosen suicide over assisting such a lost cause.

It's not like that was the only thing that had corroded and clouded the luster. I was only forty-two but I felt like I'd lived a hundred years. What magic there had been was used up. Spent. I lived only because I didn't have the fortitude to end it. I was living only for the sake of living. I removed several more cysts and every time I did this, I held that scalpel in my hand and thought how easy it would be to end it. Two slices and I could be done with it all.

But I'm too much of a coward for that.

11

I fully understand why people have children now. It fills that space when all your dreams have died and you try and instill your lost hopes in them. It's a vicious fucking circle due to the eventuality that they too will find it out how it all ends. They too will be filled with that failure and repetition, and then have children themselves.

Rinse. Lather. Repeat.

12

Then one day you're blind-sided by a Mack truck.

I woke up that morning. Startled to say the least. On my breast, to the left of my nipple, the place where my most recent growth had started, was my missing white milky mass of veins suckling like a starving, newborn infant. It was now twice the size it had been and all the nodules and other cysts had completely integrated. The larger had fully assimilated all the tinier masses into one, larger organism. I jumped out of bed in horror as I tried pulling it away. The suction of the protuberance was too great and I felt I would have to tear away my own flesh to remove it. I stood motionless at the side of my bed, the mass of cysts still attached and undulating. It was heavy, like it was filled with lead. Slowly the panic began to ebb and a calmness fell over me. It was almost euphoric. A happiness I had not felt in forever. I looked down at the parasite as it heaved and heaved and tried sucking me dry. Siphoning off what I assumed was my sickness. It was roughly the shape of any random number of larvae or slugs and had a translucent quality to it. Like looking through milky ice. Through that opaque whiteness I could see a black center that beat like a heart. Dozens of black veins exploded from the center, dispersing the lifeblood, and fading to nothing at its ends. I sat back down and ran my finger down it. It was well below room temperature and had a sandy, wet texture. It's body was extremely firm and solid. Nowhere as slimy as it looked. It had none of the gelatinous features I thought it should have. The pulsating began to slow after several minutes and then it released into my arms where I cradled it.

Thus my routine changed. It would be waiting at the door like a forlorn puppy and after another miserable day at work I would welcome its feeding. I was now its surrogate. Sucking out all the vileness and hate that seemed to attach itself and burrow its way into my body through the day. It's growth seemed to be slow and almost non-existent. I relied on it as much as it did me now. An

invisible umbilical cord and symbiotic relationship that was impossible to cut. Maybe that's why the events unfolded the way they did. There were a few occasions that I would wake at night and it would be gone. What it was doing and where it had gone were a mystery to me although it would be there every morning. Days turned to weeks and then months and I felt that maybe it was all going to work out.

13

My cell phone rang about thirty minutes before I was due at work as I was trying to find my keys. I looked at the face and it glared back telling me that work was calling. Fuck. I momentarily thought of dismissing it but answered it anyway. Laura was on the other end.

"Hello?", I said in the most irritated voice I could muster. Having to go to work was one thing, but having it be a battering ram to my castle on my own time was another.

"Edward, we need you to come in to work as soon as possible. There's an, um, issue. Just go to the back office and wait when you get here."

"Okay. What's this about?", I inquired.

"We'll talk about it when you get here."

Insolence, irritation, and adrenaline shot into my veins from various locations and set me on edge.

"Why did you even bother calling me when I was going to be there in less than an hour?", I asked, even though I knew the answer. To be a bitch and to get me worrying about all the endless possibilities that the 'problem' could be. All about having the upper hand.

"I'll meet you in the office.", she said and hung up.

I could feel everything roiling just below the skin. She wants to stir things up and it's working. I finished putting on my monkey suit, opted not to shave, and sat down for a few extra minutes with the newfound intent to be late. I got what impotent little jabs in wherever I could.

On my way to work I must have smoked three cigarettes, chaining them all together. My flesh crawled as 'In The Wake of the Bunt' by Horse The Band blared blared through the cheap speakers:

"Hearts aflame, we call the name of justice,

That and of nothing more.

Strike up the song and scream along,

'Vengeance will be ours, this time it's war!'"

I should have had a fucking drink.

I entered Rite Aid and made a bee-line to the back of the store. Again. This trip to the back had gotten way too repetitive. I avoided all eye contact and dismissed the one or two random 'hellos' from my fellow slaves. The office door was shut and I knocked. Behind the door I heard muffled voices whispering incoherently. The pause was too long for my liking. The door finally opened and I was greeted by a roomful of people. A few I recognized, many I didn't. I stepped inside.

"Edward, these are DEA agents. They would like to have a word with you.", said Laura, her voice wavering with hints of shrillness added in. She was pale and the stress lines on her face were highlighted to a new and amazing extent. Her hair, normally frazzled as it was, had taken on an insane, clown-like look. She was obviously more nervous than me and I hoped she had to at least double, if not triple, her Xanax intake for the morning. The DEA agents didn't look

like I had expected. By that I mean, they looked like some hippified version directly out of television or Hollywood. My vision of them had either been black clad and grizzled looking or somewhere around Chris Farley in a cop uniform. No, these guys were urban and diversified. There was a black guy and two women, one Asian and one white and they appeared to have been pulled directly out of a Ketel One commercial and given badges.

“What's this about?”, I asked no one in general.

The DEA agent on the left spoke up first. “My name is Agent Grier.”, the white woman said. “We have a customer that says you stole his prescription two weeks ago. August fourteenth, to be exact. We checked with his physician and the prescription WAS written. It was for a C2.”. For anyone that doesn't know much about pharmaceuticals, C2's are the king daddy of the pharmaceutical and drug abusers world. This includes, but is not limited to, oxycodone, hydromorphone, secobarbital, methadone, and everyone's favorite, methamphetamine. This stuff turns up missing, the slap on the wrist is a prison sentence. My skin began to crawl.

“We've already checked the tapes and he hands you something outside of the pharmacy.”, said the male DEA agent. “Can you please explain to us what it was?”, he inquired.

I thought back and tried to sift through of a slurry of muddy blankness. I have a hard enough time remembering what I did here at work yesterday let alone two weeks ago. But one thing I knew is, I did not want to go to jail. I never have. It's the one thing that kept me from going on some murderous killing spree. No matter how much I hated the world and the vast majority of people on it, I like my freedom and intended to have it stay that way. Although I couldn't remember, I knew I didn't do something as amateurish as that.

"I don't remember him.", I said. "There's twenty to thirty people a day that ask us questions and hand us stuff to look over. Doctors orders, the fine print on the back of a bottle of aspirin, you name it".

"Well, we need you to think hard about this.", Agent Grier said again.

"It's bullshit is what it is. I've never taken anything from this place. There's cameras everywhere.", I said as I pointed out all the locations of the cameras on the ceiling. "I'm not that stupid". My fear began to mutate into beligerance due to the audacity of the accusation. I felt the room spin a bit and the movement under my skin turned into a frenzy. It was alive, moving, and very, very unhappy.

"We're not saying you're stupid. We just want to give you a chance to give your side of the story."

"My side? Some random idiot comes in here, hands me a piece of paper on the floor, and I'm accused of theft? That's so fucking wrong.", I said. "There's no shred of proof to anything you're accusing me of."

"We're not accusing you of anything, Edward. Please calm down.", Agent Grier said while the other two still stood stoically. 'Why the hell did the other two even bother to come along?', I thought to myself.

"We just want to know what happened.", said Laura, her voice squeaking to new and higher pitches.

"Well, I just told you. Nothing happened. Who the hell was it anyway? Wait. Let me guess. Privileged information and all that, right?", I asked.

The store manager, who had been hiding in a corner finally spoke up. "I'm afraid, either way, that your time here at Rite Aid has come to an end."

"You're fucking firing me!?!", I yelled.

"Agent Grier will escort you to your locker and then out of the store."

I stood there in a sort of shock. It's funny how you can prepare yourself mentally, or think you are, for a situation like this but you never react the way you expected. You have what you're going to say, how it's all gonna go down and you never live up to it. Just like coming up with a great comeback three hours after you needed it.

"I don't have anything in the fucking lockers.", I barked and headed out to the front of the store. Agent Grier caught up to me and didn't say a word. Well, if I didn't get my licks in in the office, I figured now would be a good time.

"I can't believe that you would throw me under the bus like that!", I screamed at the pharmacy as we passed by. "I make eleven dollars a fucking hour! For this? Fuck you.", I yelled and pointed at my co-workers. Agent Grier's hand on my arm turned to a vice and began pulling me towards the door. I felt the cysts grow with extreme fervor. They popped up everywhere. My legs, my chest, and my hands as I winced at the pain as they stretched and pushed their way to the surface, growing exponentially at the situation. I saw revulsion and shock in their eyes. Good, I thought.

"Fuck you all.", I added sweeping my one free arm to everyone around me. "Fuck Rite Aid and fuck all of you pill popping addicts!", I added as I was drug out of the store.

"Don't come back here or you'll be arrested.", Agent Grier said as she turned to go back inside.

"Eat shit.", I said, taking off my smock and throwing it to the ground. I walked towards the truck and got in and lit up a cigarette and tried calming myself. Furious couldn't begin to encapsulate how I felt.

"What the fuck is going on?!", I screamed at the top of my lungs and pounded the steering wheel with my fists. I managed to throw a massive fit for about a solid thirty seconds then turned the ignition and headed home.

I pulled up to the house, unlocked the door and there it was. The one thing that can give me release and respite from all I keep locked outside of these four walls. I closed the blinds, went to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of rum, took three massive gulps and headed toward the bathroom. I stripped down to nothing and stared at myself in the mirror. It looked like my body had been bit by a thousand bees except these boiled under the skin. They scurried and crawled from the agitation. The bathroom door creaked open and it was as if he was staring up at me. I grabbed the creature and set him down on the bed.

I followed suit, except I laid down and just closed my eyes. Scant seconds later I felt his cold mouth clamp down and begin to siphon the ichor out of my poisoned frame. I felt the gradual migration under my skin towards the elder. They were aware of his presence and began their slow moving yet mass exodus to feed their kin. As I lay there, my angst and ire turned to calmness as I was drained of my days indignities. Before I drifted off to sleep, I felt my offspring detach and felt him move away, farther and farther out. I drifted off to sleep and began to dream.

That dream opened with a beautiful vista of the earth from space. Clouds spun along the surface of the glorious sphere as the blue of the oceans peeked through. I floated formlessly in the deep black void and peered around for what seemed like hours. I could see distant galaxies, millions of light years away, as if they were right in front of me. The birth and death of stars passed in fractions of time in the vast sea of worlds. It was stunningly beautiful and I was awestruck. I could have spent forever in this wonderful expanse of nothingness. The solitude and the calmness became my center until I looked back to the earth and, from my peripheral, I saw a tiny black mass begin to slowly expand from the center of Gaea. Tiny bacteria-like creatures began to swarm over the surface of the planet and in a few minutes of watching, it had covered and began to consume the planet like a cancer. A moment or a thousand years later, a speck broke through the cloud layer and then the through the atmosphere. It was spewing flame and headed off toward the direction of the sun. I followed the craft and saw it land on the red, powdery surface of Mars. I saw several human-like figures get out of the craft and head over to what looked like a manhole cover. They lifted it, crawled in, and closed the hatch behind them. I scanned the facade of the planet and began to notice the pipes that had been blown over by the surfaces sands. I began to orbit the planet and on the dark side I saw massive buildings bursting through the crust of the planet. Smoke stacks and factories billowed blackness into the thin atmosphere of Mars. Roving machines with tank treads scoured the surface, stopped, and plunged pipe after pipe into the core of the planet. This conquered space and had gone from a contained virus, once limited to our own planet, to that of a universal contagion. I wanted to cry.

15

I awoke the next morning to sirens and flashing lights coming from across the street. In the nook of my elbow the creature seemed to sleep, still suckling, although now more out of habit, as I couldn't feel a cyst anywhere. I cradled it gingerly in my arm and slowly went

to the front window and peered through it. Three police cars, an ambulance and, of course, the swarm of vultures that were the media. Going beyond simple reporting to help spread fear, panic, and distrust.

A knock at the door momentarily startled me and the nursing on my chest ceased. The creature began to struggle, its tendrils whipping around and pushing away from me.

"Hold on a sec.", I said to the person at the door.

It's struggling became so incessant that I set it on the couch next to the door. It's tendrils curled and coiled and tumbled it over the side onto the floor with a meaty slap. It's appendages shot out under the couch, found purchase and pulled itself under to hide.

I stared for a moment, turned my attention back to the door and asked, "Who is it?"

I peered through the little fish-eyed lens on the door where I saw two uniformed officers standing in the pallor of the porch light. The morning was creeping up and the indirect sunlight cast an eerie glow on everything outside of my door.

"It's the police. Can we speak to you for a moment?", one of them said.

"Sure, let me just unlock this-", I said as I fidgeted with the dead-bolt and opened the door.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions." said officer-on-the-left.

"Sure. Uh, you wanna come in?"

"No, it will only take a minute.", responded officer-on-the-right.

"How can I help you then?"

"Did you see or hear anything last night that might be considered suspicious?"

My mind wandered to what I did last night, which was nothing relevant, and the only thing I could really remember was the dream.

"No, I didn't hear or see anything. What--?"

"Did you know the Baldwins across the street?"

"I knew them. Said hello and all that."

"Have you heard any fights with other neighbors or other people over the last week that they might have been involved with?"

I shook my head and said "Nope. What happened over there?"

"We're not at liberty to discuss anything right now and we'll be back in contact with you when we have further questions.", he said, accentuating the we quite clearly. I didn't know whether to take it as a threat or what.

Officer-on-the-left handed me a card and said, "If you think of anything please give us a call."

They turned and headed back across the street. I shut the door and put the deadbolt in place. I looked down at the floor and, peering out from under the couch, I could swear, that the creature was smiling.

16

The next day I went and purchased a newspaper for the sole purpose of getting some sort of information on what happened. It

was still dark outside, cloudy, and the sun would not be seen all day. I began reading the front page as I walked through the door. The headlines read 'Four More Dead In Vicious, Cold-blooded Killings'. I continued reading:

'The police are still baffled at what is yet another in a string of horrible, ghastly and violent murders that have taken place in the Aloha/Beaverton/Hillsboro area over the last month. Jon Baldwin 34, his wife, Anita Baldwin also 34, their four-year old son, Nathan, and their six week old child, Angela, were all found decapitated in their home on Tuesday morning. There were no signs of the house being broken into and nothing was stolen. But if that wasn't grisly enough, the police say that they have yet to recover any of the heads. According to the coroner, the heads seemed to have been removed with what appear to be a series of of razor-like cuts that penetrated the flesh and that the spines 'almost look as if they have been gnawed on'. Detectives say they have several leads but have not made an arrest.'

I got a cup of coffee and looked over towards the darkened corner of the dining room where the creature was. From the shadowy corner I saw two red eyes, embedded deep in the mass, glowing like embers. Odd how you never notice things until you are forced to see them under a different light.

I sat down and continued reading.

'For the past month, several bodies have turned up in the same condition but all have been vagrants and one known prostitute. This is the first time the killer has been associated with an attack in someone's home and claimed so many victims.'

I refolded the newspaper and set it down on the table. I opened the slider and went outside, closing it behind me, and reached in my pocket for a cigarette. I stood on the deck staring at the rising sun.

There was a bit of a chill in the air. It always seemed like there were so many things to mull over. So many things to think about.

17

I laid down on the bed and felt the cold sheets underneath my body. They felt good. Crisp. I interlaced my fingers and placed my hands behind my head and tried to look at this objectively. Before I could get a train of thought going I saw, in my peripheral, the door that was only slightly ajar open just a bit more. I heard the familiar sandpaper across the carpet and a few seconds later it's tendrils flopped up onto the bed, coiled around my foot for anchoring, and pulled itself up. There it sat at the foot of the bed. It was cautious and seemed to be waiting for some sign from me. I paused momentarily then smiled widely and patted the bed for it to come. It sidled up to me, tendrils flailing, then crawled onto my chest. I felt the weight of its cold damp flesh on mine. It was soothing. Its malformed mouth slowly pressed against a large cyst on my chest that was just forming and the little, razor-sharp teeth slightly pinched the skin as it began to suckle and drain the sickness from my body. Euphoria settled in as I thought of what this creature, this little extension of me that is all my frustration and derision, has been doing at night. How it chose its victims, whether it knows what it's doing or if it's merely instinct, and how much of me is to blame for both its existence and for what it does. I guess, in the end, it really doesn't matter that I get those answers. It is slowly doing what the population is doing to itself anyway. Sucking it dry. I don't feel any guilt for the victims and I surely don't feel any guilt for what it does. My hate for humanity far exceeds any conscientious objections I could ever have towards this creature and the horrors it partakes in. The things it does are no less horrible than the rampant violence humanity imposes on itself on a daily basis. The idea that people with the capacity to think are able to instill such violence on each other with very little thought dumbfounds me. That they rationalize it. But I guess that's what I'm doing. I'm not better than them, in any way, I've just come to terms with it all. I've thought it

through. My shade is doing things I can only dream of. Living out my mid-afternoon work fantasies of revenge. There's no way I could ever end this. After having wanted something for so long and then actually getting it, well, I can't kill that. Maybe one day I will feel some sort of guilt but I'll worry about that when the day comes.

