

After

Jack Rankine inched a little closer to his campfire as he gazed at the night sky. The moon had not yet risen, so the Milky Way stood out clearly against the endless blackness of space. Thousands of individual stars glittered amid the blackness to either side of the Milky Way, but they seemed insignificant compared to the millions that blended together in that bright band. For an instant he wondered if they were lonely, then he chided himself for that foolish thought. He was very familiar with loneliness, but stars were inanimate objects and were therefore incapable of emotions.

He tossed another branch on the fire and watched the sparks dance into the sky. It still amazed him that the desert could get so cold at night after being blazing hot during the day. Tomorrow he would have to go into town. He still had plenty of food, but he could use some more coffee, duct tape, and toilet paper. It wouldn't hurt to pick up an extra pack or two of butane lighters, too. And some more bleach, of course. You couldn't have too much bleach. It took all day to go to town and it was an exhausting trip, so he decided to turn in early.

The next morning he packed the trailer for the trip, making sure to put in spare charged batteries for the golf cart. Finding an abandoned golf course with electric carts and solar charging stations had been a stroke of enormously good fortune. The carts allowed him to establish his camp a safe distance from town, farther away than if he had to walk the entire distance.

After he finished packing he drove as close to the town as he dared. Then he began the laborious task of suiting up. Rubber boots. Rain suit pants, with the leg ends heavily taped to the boots. Rain suit parka, heavily taped to the pants at the waist. Gas mask with hood tucked inside the rain suit. Rain suit hood over the gas mask hood, heavily taped. Rubber gloves tucked inside the rain suit sleeves and taped. Then he stretched an XXXL cotton long underwear top and bottom over the rain suit. He doused the long underwear with a weak solution of bleach water and strapped on a military belt with several canteens of bleach water he could use to keep the underwear wet during his trip. He wasn't certain how much protection this provided, but the evaporation helped keep

him cooler and the bleach couldn't hurt. It was still sweltering inside the rain suit, but the improvised cooling suit made it bearable. He turned toward the town and began walking toward the suburban supermarket which he knew was about two miles away.

The desert sun beat down mercilessly upon him as he trudged toward the town. Sweat stung his eyes and made it hard to see. He took his usual break in a city park, where a picnic pavilion shielded him from the sun. It was still hot, but he gave the cooling suit another soaking and felt a little better. Mostly he just needed to catch his breath. The heavy suit and the gas mask turned even a small activity like walking into an ordeal. He sat on the bench of a picnic table and gazed around the park. At the far side of the park, a pack of wild dogs was tearing at the barely recognizable remains of what had once been a human being. Not one of the original inhabitants, obviously. They had long since rotted away to the point where even the dogs weren't interested in them. Probably someone who, like Jack, had been far enough away from town to escape the original epidemic but who had run out of food and been driven back to town by hunger, hoping the virus had died out. Jack didn't know how long the virus could survive without human hosts, but the sight of this unfortunate being told him it wasn't safe yet. Instinctively he touched the Beretta on his belt, reassuring himself he had some protection against the dogs. They had never bothered him on any of his previous trips, but there was always a first time.

Reluctantly Jack forced himself to his feet and trudged the remaining few blocks to the supermarket. The front door had long ago been forced open by looters, but it must have been during the final days of the epidemic as the store itself was remarkably untouched. Jack grabbed a shopping cart and walked into the store. As always, he felt his chest tighten with fear. It was eerie outside, walking through a town with no people, but Jack felt relatively safe there. He was no scientist, but he suspected the sunlight probably killed any virus that might have once been outside. Inside the store, however, it was dark. Every surface, every dust particle, and possibly the air itself was infested with the deadly virus.

He knew the layout of the store by heart and he quickly began picking his way through the aisles, illuminated by shafts of sunlight which came through the windows. He picked

up the coffee and duct tape first, along with odds and ends of canned food that looked good. He had a fairly good larder at his campsite, but it never hurt to have more. He looked longingly at the breakfast cereal, spaghetti, Bisquick, and other boxed foods, but he realized he had no way to decontaminate those foods. He was putting toilet paper into his cart when he was startled by a moving shadow. Instinctively he squatted down and quietly slipped the Beretta out of its holster. He squinted against the brightness of the windows, trying to see what was moving in the shadows. There! A figure shrouded in white coveralls was pushing a shopping cart in his direction. Jack lowered himself as far as he could, making sure he stayed in the shadows, and kept his eye on the figure. It walked past his aisle and disappeared behind the shelves. It didn't seem to have noticed Jack, but he had time to observe that it was wearing a civilian gas mask and what looked like medical booties.

Jack's first instinct was to lie low and hide until whoever it was left the store, but then he realized it had been heading toward the housewares section. It was after bleach! Jack's whole existence depended upon bleach. Leaving his cart behind, Jack crept as quietly as he could toward housewares. He got there just as the creature was putting the last bottle of bleach into its cart. It saw Jack, and his Beretta, and froze with fear. Jack hesitated. He had intended to shoot, but when the creature stared at him he realized it wasn't just an animal, like the wild dogs in the street. It was another human being. He couldn't kill a human over a bottle of bleach, even if his life did depend on it. Surely he could find more bleach somewhere. He carefully put the pistol back in its holster and held up his hands to show they were empty. He saw the stranger sag with relief. Then it called out to him, but the gas mask and the multiple hoods muffled the voice to the point where Jack couldn't make out what it was saying. He tried to reply, but it couldn't understand him either. Then it motioned for him to follow and started toward the rear of the store. When they got to the back wall it opened a door, pulled a flashlight from a holster on its belt, and led him into a dark room. Jack realized this was the stockroom. It was obvious the stranger had been here before, as it led Jack straight to the shelving where the bleach was stored. There were dozens of unopened cases of bleach. Jack picked up a case and they started back toward the door. Along the way the stranger

stopped to pick up a couple of large packages, briefly shining the flashlight on them to show Jack they were canned hams.

Jack carried the case of bleach back to the housewares section and put it on the shelf. Then he went to get his cart. Along the way he made a mental note to bring a flashlight with him the next time he went shopping. The stranger was still in housewares when Jack brought his cart there for the bleach, and it placed a canned ham in Jack's cart. Jack said "Thank you," hoping the stranger would understand the sentiment even if it couldn't make out the words. The stranger was smaller than Jack, and the muffled voice sounded like it was probably a woman, but the eyepieces on Jack's gas mask were fogged with sweat and the round faceplate on the stranger's gas mask was similarly fogged so Jack had no idea what her face looked like. The bleach was the last item on his list, so he waved good-bye and headed for the exit.

The stranger followed Jack out the door and tagged along behind him as he pushed his cart down the street. Jack began to worry that it was going to follow him all the way back to his camp. As lonely as he was, he didn't have enough food for two and he certainly didn't want to take the risk of coming into close contact with another human. He had survived this long by not taking chances. He was trying to figure out a way to tell it to go away when he heard it call out. He looked back, and it was waving good-bye to him as it turned down a side street. He waved back and then went on his way, relieved to be alone once again. He hadn't gone more than half a block before he heard a scream behind him. He looked back and saw the stranger's cart lying on its side with cans and bottles scattered on the road. Apparently some of the broken bottles had contained food, as a pack of wild dogs was quickly converging on the scene.

Jack left his cart and ran to the stranger. One wheel of the cart had dropped through a drainage grate, and when the cart fell over it had ripped that wheel off. The cart was useless. A few of the bolder dogs were lapping at a broken jar of spaghetti sauce and a snarling pack was nipping at their heels. Jack fired his Beretta in the general direction of the dogs and they scattered at the noise, but he knew they wouldn't be gone for long. The stranger was frantically picking through the rubble, picking up items that obviously were

most important to it. Jack motioned it to hand them to him so it could sort faster. He tugged at its shoulder when the dogs began to return and led it back to his cart. They took turns pushing the cart which was now filled with their combined treasures.

When they got to where Jack had left the golf cart he pulled a spray bottle of bleach solution and a scrub brush out of the trailer and began disinfecting items from the shopping cart. He handed the bottle to the stranger and pulled out another bottle and brush for himself. After they had finished disinfecting all the items and the shopping cart they began disinfecting each other's protective suits. Then they began the laborious process of taking off the suits. Jack was mildly surprised to notice they both took things off in the same order, and the next to last thing they took off was their gas mask. The other creature was in fact a woman. Jack guessed she was in her mid-20's, which made her about 10 years younger than he was. Her face looked careworn, like the pictures you see of women during the Great Depression. He wondered if his face looked careworn, too. She was drenched in sweat and her wet hair was plastered to her head and shoulders, but she was a living, human being and to Jack she was beautiful. They stared at each other in awkward silence, as they had both spent a long time carefully avoiding any form of human contact. Finally Jack shrugged his shoulders, extended his right hand, and said "I'm Jack Rankine." The woman hesitated for a moment, then reached for his hand while saying "I'm Jill Martin." They laughed when their hands touched and they realized they were both still wearing their rubber gloves. Following what Jack had learned as chemical warfare defense protocol and what Jill had learned as infectious disease protocol, the gloves are the last thing to be removed.

As they drove back to Jack's camp, they told each other their stories of what they had done "before." Jack had been a foreman for a mechanical construction company, installing heating and air conditioning equipment in new buildings. He also was a member of the National Guard, and his unit was activated when the epidemic first hit. They traveled around the state converting schools and other large public buildings into emergency hospital wards to care for the sick. They moved so frequently it took a couple of days for word to reach him that his wife and son were sick. By the time he got the word, they had already died and been cremated in accordance with the state's emergency

medical procedures. There didn't seem to be any point to going home on bereavement leave, so he stayed with the unit. Less than two weeks later men in his unit began falling ill and dying so quickly that his platoon leader gave everyone in the platoon handwritten orders to 'get the hell out of here!' Most of the men went home. Jack wrangled as much camping gear, MRE's, and emergency supplies as he could get from a sympathetic supply sergeant and headed for the desert.

Jill had been a nurse, married for just over a year. She and her architect husband had decided to put off having children for a couple of years while they paid off their college loans. When the epidemic hit she wound up living at the hospital, working 16 hour shifts and sleeping in a special "staff ward." The days all blurred together until one day, when she was performing triage on a bunch of new arrivals, and she discovered her husband was among them. Her nursing experience told her he was too far gone to even bother admitting him, but her heart wouldn't let her make that call. She stayed by his side for the nine hours it took him to die. Then she got into her car and left the hospital forever, still wearing her biohazard suit. She drove to a cabin in the foothills that had belonged to her husband's parents. She stayed there until the food ran out. Realizing she didn't have enough gas to drive to town and then back to the cabin, she packed everything she thought might prove useful into her car and drove to within walking distance of the town. She set up camp there, living out of her car and making foraging expeditions into town as infrequently as possible.

That night, after a dinner of canned ham, they sat next to each other and stared at the stars. After so many months without talking to another human being Jack thought they would both be chatterboxes, but in fact they were mostly silent. It was as if they had forgotten how to make conversation. Jack struggled to think of something to say. Finally he decided to verbalize an observation that had kept coming back to him over the past several months.

"You know, it's funny" he said. "All my life people talked about how the world was coming to an end. We were going to have another ice age. Or a comet was going to crash into the earth. We were polluting the air and water and it was going to poison us.

Then we were going to run out of fossil fuel so we couldn't pollute any more, but we'd die of starvation because we couldn't raise enough food. I guess we had enough fuel to keep polluting, because then I learned we were destroying the ozone layer and we were all going to die of radiation poisoning. That didn't seem to happen, though, and the next thing I knew we were causing global warming and we were all going to drown when the sea level rose. I stopped listening to these doomsayers after a while, because nothing ever seemed to happen. Then, Wham! This epidemic hit us out of nowhere. Nobody predicted that. Dozens of gloom and doom predictions that never came true, and we were wiped out by something we never saw coming."

"We should have seen it coming, though" Jill answered. "At least, those of us who studied biology should have seen it coming. Except for the ice age and the comet, all the catastrophes you described are signs of a population out of control. There are lots of examples in nature. When a species has no natural enemies its population increases until it kills itself off. It runs out of food, or it fouls its own habitat, or a disease springs up which decimates the population. Maybe lemmings are the smartest animal on earth. When their population grows too large thousands of them run into the sea and drown, leaving a smaller population that can live quite comfortably. All other species keep going until something devastates the entire population, sometimes to the point of extinction. Except man, of course. We've always found a way to sidestep the consequences of a rising population. We would have run out of food decades ago if Fritz Haber hadn't discovered how to take nitrogen out of the air and turn it into fertilizer. We found new fuels. We cleaned up our act and stopped polluting. We fixed the hole in the ozone layer. And in our arrogance we kept on multiplying, secure in the belief that we could sidestep problems forever. Then this new disease popped up and spread through our tightly packed civilization so fast all the scientists died before they came up with a cure." She paused for a moment, remembering her own husband. He wasn't a scientist. He was just one of the billions of people who trusted the scientists to protect them. As a nurse, she felt she had failed him. She considered herself a part of the scientific community that had failed those billions of people. And now they were all dead. It was too late for a cure. "Before the epidemic I heard the population was up to seven billion people" she said sadly. "How many do you think are left now? People like us, who

through luck or foresight have had no human contact for months. Maybe a couple thousand? And how long is this virus going to last? I've never heard of a virus surviving this long after its host has died. It must somehow encapsulate itself, like anthrax. Even if it does eventually die out, we'll have no way of knowing that. We'll still wrap ourselves up in protective suits out of fear."

They sat together in silence for a long time, each lost in their own memories. Then without a word they each retired to their own sleeping bag and slept fitfully through the night.

The next day Jill began running a fever. Jack gave her what few medicines he had and she advised him on what to do for as long as she was still lucid, but they both knew it was hopeless. He sat by her side all day and all night, giving her water to drink and placing cool damp cloths on her forehead, but the following morning he was digging her grave. Waves of conflicting emotions stormed through his brain as he dug. He was devastated at losing her. Even though he hadn't known her very long, it was so wonderful to talk to another human being again. She was likely to be the last human he'd ever talk to in his life. Why had this disease taken her from him so soon? Why had it taken his wife, and his son? He cursed the disease. Remembering what Jill had said the night before, he cursed mankind for bringing this disease upon itself. He felt abandoned by Jill. What had she done wrong? Had she made her camp too close to the edge of town? Was there a tear in her protective suit? Had she been careless while decontaminating or taking it off? He couldn't help but feel angry at her for bringing this disease upon herself, and he felt guilty for feeling that anger. Still, he'd been so careful for so long, and then he let his guard down for a stranger. He should have shot her when he had the chance.

He dug a deep grave, to make certain the wild dogs wouldn't dig her up. The thought momentarily occurred to him that he should dig two graves, as he didn't want the dogs to get to his body either, but he realized that when he died there would be no one left to fill in the hole. He tried to be as gentle as possible as he lowered her body into the grave, but it fell the last couple of feet and landed with a sickening thud. Then he shoveled dirt back into the grave. He filled it gently at first, jiggling the shovel so just a thin shower of

dirt fell onto the body. Once the body was no longer visible and he was shoveling dirt onto dirt, he shoveled faster. He had just enough time to finish filling the grave before he felt the first waves of fever sweep through his body.