

## Unraveled

I could hear their shrieks through the closed windows. Dozens of them stalked the streets. I assumed I was the only one left who wasn't sick.

Unclosed doors smacked their frames in the breeze, whispering the story of their past tenants. Mowed lawns sprouted patches of overgrown grass. Blood was strewn across fences—and if any part of the victim survived, their screams lingered in the throats of the beasts they soon became. They lived on through the Sickness that devoured the world within months. And instead of fleeing like so many others, I stayed, watching the world end from my second-floor apartment.

Gazing past the reflection of my wild short hair and tired eyes, I spotted the red stain on the blacktop—what was left of a man, now nothing more than scattered guts on the pavement.

What used to be a woman halted in my line of sight, sniffing the air. Its gnarled black hair sat on its head like an unkempt bush, its tattered clothes muddied. Thick, blackened veins snaked down its back from a swollen mass on its shoulder.

The sickly creature hollered. Falling to its knees, it licked the week-old dried blood, snorting like pig in a trough.

More Sicklies came for their turns. This was an everyday thing. And every day, with every lick, the proof of the man's existence dwindled.

Jagger barked.

I glanced over my shoulder, seeing the small white Chihuahua jump from the couch and scurry to the kitchen.

Moments later, a *clatter* came from the neighboring apartment, followed by the sound of shuffling.

Jesus, an older man, lived next door to me. Before the Sickness, our relationship didn't extend past first names, though he always got mine wrong—in his defense, Paul *did* sound a lot like John. Now that it was just us, I think he appreciated my company.

Taking three steps from my bedroom to the living room, I swiped the puzzle book and the pen from the coffee table; the sprawled out newspapers shifted with the swift movement.

I used to see Jesus with his face in puzzle books all the time. I found this book displaced in the hall the day I decided to lock myself away. Every crossword was finished, albeit the last one—the one Jesus and I had been working on for weeks.

I knocked on the wall next to the television, readying my partner for the question.

A tired groan answered.

“Alright,” I said, staring at the crossword puzzle, several answers already filled.

“Same one as yesterday: seven down—five-letter word for ‘reality’.”

He didn't respond.

I knocked again. “You there?”

Nothing but a muffled grunt.

Sighing, I tossed the book and the pen back on the table. “Fine. We'll try later.”

The room dimmed as the sun descended. Jagger came running from the kitchen, jumping on the couch. I caught a whiff of his business as the aroma marinated in the musty air.

Proper garbage disposal being the least of my worries, I gathered the used pee pads, opening the window to drop them to the pile of trash on the sidewalk below.

Nearby Sicklies pounced at the sign of movement, only to grunt angrily the moment they realized it wasn't a meal.

After closing the window, I joined Jagger on the couch. The headlines of the newspapers before me seemed like a joke. Who could've predicted this future?

Dec. 15, 2019: *GIANT HORNETS ARRIVE IN US—ARE THEY DANGEROUS?*

Feb. 25, 2020: *UNKNOWN FLU-LIKE VIRUS REPORTED IN US*

April 4, 2020: *AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR AMONG FEVER VIRUS AND BUZZER VICTIMS.*

Footsteps stole my attention.

I shot a look at the door.

Jagger growled, his small, pointy ears facing forward.

Standing, I walked over to peek through the peephole.

A woman stepped into view, her hair cut short, her cheeks rosy, her clothes soiled.

My eyes fell to the jiggling doorknob. I stepped back, watching, waiting, silent.

She knocked. Again. And again.

Jagger growled.

“I know you’re in there,” she said. “I can hear your dog.”

I said nothing.

“I saw you throw garbage out of your window,” she said in a small voice. “Please. There are so many of those things out there.”

My nails dug into my palms as I balled fists, inwardly wishing the woman away. I couldn’t risk exposing myself to the Sickness. She could be asymptomatic. She could be stung. She could be *one of those things in a matter of minutes*.

Another knock. “I’m begging you—please.”

A loud *thump* from my right made me yelp.

Jesus had been listening the entire time, every word riling him up until he gained the strength to pound at the wall. He hollered.

The woman on the other side of my door gasped at the sickly sounds. After a moment of hesitance, she fled.

I waited, listening to her footfalls get farther and farther away until they vanished. Sighing in relief, I cursed at myself for not locking the stairwell doors when I had the chance. Hopefully Jesus did enough to scare her away for good.

The key to survival wasn’t in numbers, no matter what the media always claimed. More people meant more to keep track of meant more to care for meant more mouths to feed. I was fine feeding Jagger and myself.

Even though the woman had left, Jesus kept at it, screeching, scratching, and flinging himself at the wall.

“Jesus, that’s enough,” I said. “She’s gone.”

He didn't stop.

I pounded my fist where I thought he was, shouting, "Enough, I said! Stop!"

His shrieking loudened. He clawed at the barrier between us faster and faster, his slobbery noises making me cringe.

Jagger hid under the coffee table.

Darkness crept in slowly until it swallowed the room. I continued staring at the wall despite looking at nothing but the blackness in front of me.

Jesus' attempts at getting to me declined to grunts and the occasional screech as he walked the length of his apartment—the length of the wall separating us.

I bit my lip, suddenly missing the sound of that woman's voice—a normal voice. Someone that spoke back. Someone whose existence wasn't meant to destroy mine.

Jesus hollered again.

I shoved my hand in my pants pocket, retrieving my ear plugs. Stuffing them into my ears, I walked to the couch to lie down. There was nothing left to do but wait for him to stop.

Muffled barking startled me awake. I sat up, removing the earplugs.

Jagger sat facing the door. He barked again.

I waited, listening to what he heard.

Footsteps—slow, clumsy footsteps.

I scrambled to my feet, hurrying to the door, stuffing the earplugs in my pocket. I peeked through the peephole. My heart leapt.

It was the woman! Though something was different. Her head was turned right as if she were looking down the hall. Her hair was disheveled, her rosy cheeks now pale, her clothes ripped and drenched in sweat.

She knocked. “Hello? Are you still there?” she asked in a tremulous voice. “I’m so scared.”

My fingers twitched at the thought of opening the door. This could be my last chance. It could be us against the world.

I reached for the deadbolt.

The woman entered a coughing fit, phlegm gurgling at the back of her throat. She knocked again—harder this time. “Please.”

My arm dropped to my side at the distortion in her voice—it was a growl. I peered through the peephole again.

Craning her neck, the woman rolled her shoulders. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. My suspicion proved true when she turned her head left.

Her cheek was swollen to the size of a golf ball, the small red dot of a sting wound at the center, the surrounding tissue inflamed. Black veins branched from the wound, spreading across her face.

She grunted, hitting herself in the head over and over as she clenched her eyes shut. “Please!” she shouted. Her voice became something else—something monstrous. “Open up!”

Movement came from Jesus’ apartment. He screeched, then punched the wall.

The woman drove her shoulder into the door. Again—again—*again!* She wouldn't stop.

Jagger barked and barked.

My stomach hardened. I fought to swallow the lump in my throat, listening to the woman's voice devolve into ghastly, guttural sounds that mixed with Jesus' shrieks, forming an inharmonious duet.

I turned away and walked to the couch.

My gaze fell to the puzzle book still sitting on the coffee table.

*REALITY.*

Glancing at the door, the hideous resonance of the creatures' voices echoing through the room, the once unknown answer now ached in my chest. I picked up the pen.

When I finished, I stared at the five spaces, each letter burning in my mind:

*ALONE.*

I fished in my pocket for my earplugs, then shoved them into my ears. Sitting on the couch, I leaned back and closed my eyes, waiting for the noise to end.