

It had begun with a simple flu or so it had been thought. How the cold had come to be, no one knew or particularly cared. In truth, it was the devil's flu, something no one could have predicted or would ever want to see. It was one villager, one who lived on the outskirts of society and had no particular friends, simply acquaintances. It was just a single villager with what they described as the worst headache imaginable, as if there was something inside their skull that was trying to break its way out. The doctor simply brushed it off as exaggeration and assigned simple medicine, the same medicine the doctor always gave when someone complained of any pain. The poor rural doctor, without any particular formal medical education worth making note of, had no idea of the hell residing within that villager. No one knew what would come.

### **POUNDING OF THE DRUMS**

The villager's headache did not go away and they began to complain quite vocally of a terrible backache. Being a generally very close-knit community and wanting the complaints to stop, the other villagers began to care for the villager. They watched as the villager developed a fever which spiked so high that they could feel it even when their hands were a foot away from the villager's forehead and the villager began to vomit everything in their stomach until it was only dry heaves that went on and on until one would swear they would hack up their lungs in a moment. The villager's face locked into an expressionless mask, eyelids half-closed and almost looking like the eyeballs were about to pop out of their sockets. As the caretakers watched on helplessly, the eyes became blood red and the face took on a decidedly yellow tint, red specks dotting it like stars. The villager grew irritable, snapping at everything and everyone, a nightmare to be around. The red speckles spread more and more until the entire face was an expressionless mass of bruises, huge, purple shadows set off by ruby eyes.

Still, the caretakers stayed, terrified but unsure what else to do. They couldn't bring themselves to leave anyone to die alone in such a terrible state. The doctor was called to the hut but he was as clueless as the rest. Word of the villager's strange condition spread and everyone came to look in on them, a few wanting to see if they had heard of anything like this, the rest simply curious. The hut was a revolving door of people. On the last day, the villager suddenly began to cough, a deep cough that brought up vast quantities of blood. The blood was speckled with black and a vivid shade of red no one had seen before. The villager's face began to droop, hanging down from the underlying bones as if trying to separate from the skull. And the coughing continued, constantly bringing up more and more blood long past when the stomach should have been emptied. Blood began to gush freely from both nostrils and the hut smelled of a slaughterhouse in a matter of mere minutes, a pool rapidly forming around the villager.

The coughing eventually stilled for a time though the blood continued to pour from the nose. The entire time, there was no expression, no recognition of the world around them. The villagers wrinkled their noses against the stench but none made a move to leave. It was like watching a terrible crash, horrific but utterly riveting. In the last moments, the villager began to cough up massive quantities of blood once more, almost more than one would expect possible for a human body to hold. The blood sprayed out everywhere in the tiny room, still speckled with black but also with bits of pink flesh. Then quite suddenly, the villager collapsed and there was no more movement though the blood continued to pour.

### **ASHES IN THE ROSES**

The villager died there, on the floor of their hut as everyone around was frozen in shock, black-speckled crimson running down their faces and covering their bodies. As soon as the shock wore off, there was a mad scramble as everyone rushed out of the hut. They threw their bloodied clothes in, not caring that it left them in only undergarments or, in some cases, nothing at all. Without a word needing to be spoken, the hut was set on fire and all those gathered there watched with nearly glazed eyes as the fire

burned larger and larger, a bonfire that lit their bodies but not their hearts. No one knew what hell could have caused something so terrible and nobody particularly wanted to know. All they wanted was for it to be gone and never return. Whatever had killed the villager was nothing to be messed with, that message rang true.

No one who had been at the bonfire dared speak a word of what they had witnessed. They hoped in vain that if they did not pay it any mind, it would cease to have existed at all. They all fervently wished that the real life nightmare could somehow be magicked into being a sleeping one. For a while, it worked until seven days later. One of the caretakers, a woman who had the misfortune to get some of that speckled blood in her mouth as it splattered, began to get pains within her back. She brushed it off at first, thinking it was just the result of working too hard. She took the next day off but instead of lessening, the ache began to spread through her entire body and into her head. Every day the pain continued to grow worse, her entire body aching like something had run her over but eventually she had to go back to work. Even as she began to run a fever and her skin began to gain a slight yellow tint, she did her best to ignore it. Her sleep, however, began to decrease as rapidly as her health as she remembered that first villager. No, she couldn't have something so terrible, no, no, no. And then her eyes turned red and she could deny it no more.

Still, she hid her condition, going about her business in fear until all that made her herself faded away and even then, what was left continued about the routine of daily living. Somehow, she managed to go undetected until the day she began to cough up the black-speckled blood. As quickly as they could, the village locked her up in an abandoned hut but the blood splattered many, including her own children, before they managed it. Everyone scrubbed at the blood-splattered skin until it bled but that just invited the demonic malady inside. Even as one victim wasted away within her prison, the demon began to make itself quite at home within new hosts. The village would not yet see the last of it.

And so the malady continued to spread, further and further. It wormed its explosive way out of those it roosted within, scrambling to find a new place to claim for its own. Every time, however careful the terrified villagers tried to be, the demon found a new home. The entire village smelled of a slaughterhouse as on and on it spread like a wildfire in dry brush. The malady was heartless, claiming everyone who the black-speckled blood had worked its way into. No one, not the young, old, or even the most physically fit was exempt. Everyone fell when the demon claimed them for itself.

Eventually, the healthy villagers grew smart and began wrapping themselves in plastic to protect against the blood. Masks and gloves also became a constant. Those who had been able to afford them wore the raincoats purchased from a long ago trip to the nearest town and passed down through the family. Faded in color but strong and steady, the raincoats held true, bearing more than a subtle resemblance to a suit of armor against the dragon of the malady. Those with the raincoats soon became responsible for taking any villager who was showing tell-tale symptoms to the quarantined areas. It was often a terrible job as some family members refused to admit their beloved had anything more than the flu or another benign affliction. Sobbing children clung to their parents, mothers clutching their young child. In that moment of separation, it was hard to separate logic from emotion, to distance oneself from someone so dear. Still, it had to be done and those with raincoats did the thankless task nearly daily.

The corpses and everything touched by the black-speckled blood were burned when all life fled the victim. As terrible as it was, it was the easier task, accompanied by a sense of closure. By the time a victim exploded with blood, they themselves were long gone, simply a living corpse awaiting its end. It became a terrible routine, never to be broken, never to change. No one survived the disease, all dying in its wake. To become infected was to die, nothing else had yet to occur.

## **RAINCOATS IN THE SUNLIGHT CAME AND TOOK MOMMY AWAY**

Quite suddenly, there was a rallying. The remaining villagers, though their number had been decimated, became more adept at handling the infected and fewer people grew sick by the day until there were no new cases, just villagers finishing their steady march to death. As the remaining villagers gazed into their makeshift quarantine, they debated what to do from here. Surely they couldn't stay, not somewhere the virus had so thoroughly claimed for itself. They had never faced something like this before. Who knew how deep into the ground it went or how long it would remain in the land? They had been ravaged so thoroughly already; another epidemic would mean the annihilation of the entire village. Even as it stood, those who remained were shattered into countless shards. Parents had lost children, children had lost parents, little children suddenly found themselves orphans or without their siblings, married people found themselves widows or widowers, and many families had been wiped out completely, not a soul remaining.

The villagers began to pack, grabbing everything of value, particularly keepsakes of the dead. Though they had the shortest lives, it was largely the little children who packed the most things. Everything was valuable to them, even a shred of paper was vital as it had Mommy's handwriting, and Daddy's clothes had to come with because they smelled like him and all of Brother's toys and Sister's dolls. None of the adults protested, however, resolving to simply bear the extra weight. The children had lost so much, far more than anyone so young should ever have to. If the physical items helped them, they would bring it all. They would give the children everything they needed.

The villagers found a new location a short walk from the current village that would work just as well and steadily began to build a new village from the ground up, grateful that enough people who knew how to build homes had survived. Perhaps in optimism, they built a few more houses than were needed for the newly amalgamated families and, of course, they built the biggest, grandest shrine to the dead they could. Those who had died would never be forgotten. It was all they could do to keep them close, after all.

Once the last of the infected died, the village was set ablaze and the villagers watched the flames consume everything. Though there had been great protest, the children came to watch, wanting to say their final goodbyes to those they had lost and the village that was the only home they had ever known. The adults could not bear to look at the children, the resolution on small faces down which silent tears flowed freely. They were letting go of what was left behind with more grace than was expected which made it all the more poignantly sad. It broke the heart of the adults to see the children like this and they rallied around them, folding them in their love. Silent promises were made to the burning flames that the children would know only happiness from this day forward and so would they. They would rebuild stronger though never better. Precious lives had been taken away, never able to be replaced. The village watched in silence as their old world burned away.

## **ASHES, ASHES, WE ALL FADE AWAY**