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ARMEGGEDON

By J.E. Taylor

I sat on the cold sand staring at the reflection of the strange sky. It looked like a rainbow erupted, leaving a trail of blood across the spectrum. The mighty Pacific, reduced to a still and death-filled lake - no surf, no quiet lapping of the sand, just choked silence. The rotting stench of death tinged by the salty sea filled the air.

I turned, wincing at the pain in my strained lower back, and scanned the beach and the burning building in the center of the concrete parking lot. I blew a stream of air from my mouth and the fabric of the handkerchief fluttered from the disturbance.

I still don't understand why I'm alive. Nine lives used up, so to speak, spared from the disease and subsequent acts of sheer stupidity. By all accounts, I should have died a thousand times over by now.

The disease.

Like a spear piercing my liver, I folded over from the memory. Burning tears mixed with smoke from the funeral pyre scathed my eyes. I closed them against the soot, against the memories, against the pain. But they came anyway, taking me hostage.

The last television program I saw was months ago. A dying scientist examined the biological weapon, explaining the hybrid concoction to the masses. Anthrax, Ebola, cancer, meningitis and a particularly virulent strain of swine flu had been successfully combined into an airborne disease that spread like wild fire.

And a fanatical faction in the Middle East released it in a coordinated attack on both Europe and the United States.

Crazy fucks thought it would stay localized.

Crazy fucks never grasped the full scope of what they created.

Crazy fucks didn't know when they released the virus they sentenced the earth to die.

Had they known, would they still have released it?

Obsessed by the question, I let it dominate my mind, leaving no room for the more crippling thoughts. But it wasn't the television program that brought the pressure down on my chest like a two ton bolder, restricting my lungs and folding me in half whenever something barreled through the brick wall surrounding those taboo memories.

No, it wasn't the television show at all.

That dying doctor droning on about the virus was secondary to the boy in my arms.

My Daniel, my six-year-old angel, laying in my lap, suffering, sobbing through the bloody coughs, his skin as hot as the pavement in Phoenix at noon, his torso covered in bruises from internal bleeding, his organs turning to liquid as the disease ate through his body.

And there wasn't a damn thing I could do.

I knew what was happening, I had watched the virus take my husband earlier that day and I knew Danny didn't have much longer. He was suffering and God help me, I couldn't end it for him.

That iota of hope still clung to me, if I could kick it, certainly my child could.

But that's not what happened.

He died in my arms just as surely as my husband did hours before.

And this disease, this hell unleashed on earth, didn't stop destroying when the host died. Not right away. No it kept eating until all that remained was a gelatinous skeleton, covered in a bruised layer of skin or fur or scales or feathers and a slow escape of fermented liquid, blood and pus ripe with disease, drained from every pore.

The smell of rotting corpses descended over the town like a shroud and in those early days, I found myself vomiting more often than not at even a hint of the vile scent.

Frantic, I went house to house searching for survivors, but there was no one but the ghosts of the dead. I found myself on the town green, exhausted, drained, numb and I sank to the steps. I couldn't wrap my head around the devastation.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, I scanned what used to be a scene right out of a Norman Rockwell painting and blinked. If it weren't for the colorful homes lining the once vivid town green, I'd have thought I just stepped into a black and white movie.

The trees dripped with large black drops of decay, some already cast to the ground, unable to support their own weight. The mighty oak in the center of the town green was nothing but petrified wood, surrounded by shriveled dry grass now completely devoid of color, a pale

gray fur on the deep brown soil. I rubbed my eyes trying to wipe away the horrific illusion and glanced to my right. The potted plant next to me, once a colorful bloom of petunias was now a sludge pile.

That was the first time I realized the true horror of the airborne virus. It killed more than just humans and dogs and cats and deer and birds. Anything it came in contact with it attacked, morphing into the perfect blend of viral bacteria aimed at destroying whatever it clung to before moving onto the next victim. It didn't discriminate; it didn't care whether the host was a member of the plant or animal kingdom, this nightmare strain devoured everything it touched.

The world was dying and I was the only witness.

There had to be someone out there whose fever broke before the worst of the symptoms hit, whose bruises faded away like shadows from clouds passing on a sunny day.

Someone who has no understanding why they were spared.

Someone like me.

Surely, I couldn't be the only human left on the earth, could I?

That thought got me moving. Well, that and the rumble in my stomach.

I left my home on the Connecticut shore on a warm spring day, the car packed to the hilt with water, canned goods, pasta and anything that wouldn't spoil. I had a suitcase of my most comfortable clothes and my purse. The only snag in my oh-so-perfect plan was the gas gauge. The needle hovered just above the E, which meant I had just enough to get me to the nearest gas station.

I pulled out of my driveway, weaving between the fallen trees and strewn cars. A little short sighted considering, but I was naïve, not realizing that when I ran out of gas, that was it.

I don't know how many times I scanned my credit card. It must have been at least a half dozen scan, stare, sigh and scan again. I varied the ritual, sprinkling reams of swears in between each step, staring at the dead pump fully expecting it to roar to life just for me.

I guess you could say I was in a state of shock and when the reality came, the card tumbled through my fingers falling to the ground. I almost followed it too. My legs turned to jelly and I grabbed for the side of the car to steady myself.

No electricity, no gas.

Such a simple concept and yet the most complicated one in my world at the time. I had no clue how to get the pumps working and had less of a clue how to siphon gas from the cars around me.

How was I supposed to get the hell out of dodge without my car?

I thought my capacity for panic had dulled, but this flipped the switch and I had a full out attack, sinking to the ground against the side of my tire, hopelessness stretched endlessly before me. My chest fought for each fragment of air, the ragged wheezing grating on my nerves enough to snap me out of it.

“Get moving girl.” My shaky voice broke the silence and the sound on the flat air startled me, loosening my lungs.

I climbed to my feet and slid back into the car, pulling out of the parking lot.

I slammed the brakes, my eyes locking on the sporting goods store at the far corner of the plaza. I had an AHA moment, an epiphany.

“A bike.” *Yeah, that's what I need, a bike.*

I threw my car in reverse and pulled forward into the street-side mall. Of course the store was locked, but that didn't deter me. Nope, so intent in my mission, I didn't even blink when I tossed the small shopping cart through the display window.

Daintily, I stepped inside, righting the shopping cart and scanning the dark store. The bikes were in the back, lining the wall and floor, but I diverted to the camping supply section.

I grabbed anything I thought I would need and hesitated in front of the gun counter. A small voice in the back of my head urged me to grab one of the guns; however, I wasn't versed in firearms, so I stood surveying and debating. When my gaze locked with my reflection another realization hit.

"I'll probably end up shooting my foot off or something." A nervous, almost crazed cackle came from the wells of my chest and I quickly turned away from the reflection.

Instead, I opted for a heavy aluminum bat and a small hatchet for protection, which would fit in one of the compartments of my handlebar bag. Not that I was expecting to encounter much, but I figured those two things would be more useful than a gun.

The last thing I grabbed was a fleece throw with my favorite football team emblazoned in the soft fabric. A relic, I realized, but one that brought me comfort.

Outside the store I packed up the storage bags and fit them on the bike along with a large lockable trailer that carried the camping supplies I grabbed. I did an inventory; tent, sleeping bag, Coleman stove, propane tanks, flash lights, batteries, canned goods, cooking utensils, matches, water, vitamins, food and snacks. It had been years since I'd gone camping and I wondered if I had enough to sustain a long ride.

I crossed into the grocery store and pilfered the energy bars, bringing as much as I could carry out and dumping them in the trailer. *There, I think that should do the trick.* And with that, I started on my great adventure, my quest to find others like me.

For each town I passed through, a notch of enthusiasm died and more sores marred my ass. Exhaustion took hold but I pushed on day after day despite the almost constant nausea accompanied by crippling despair.

No survivors.

Anywhere.

No animals, no birds, no vegetation, just a dusty gray landscape everywhere I traveled, marred only by manmade structures. I tried to keep to the more populated routes, the ones with the Wal-Mart's and the large grocery chains, replenishing my supplies as I went. But there are large gaps in the southwest. Larger than I anticipated and the heat, even in late fall, was oppressive. Dry heat my ass, it was life-sapping and sweat-rendering and it nearly did me in. It took weeks to cross the Mohave Desert and even though I stocked up in Phoenix and then again in Blythe following Route 10 all the way west, my meager supplies ran out long before I hit Indio.

Hallucinations gripped me through that horrific leg, and those few random gas stations became my utopia, my saviors with mold encrusted refrigerators housing the few bottles of water and soda and the paltry pickings of snack food that they had left on the shelves kept me alive. But most of the time they were just a nasty mirage that propelled me forward.

I thought Indio was a mirage too, but when I rolled off the highway into the town, I started sobbing at the sight of the local mega-grocery store. I sat in the dark, drinking bottle after bottle of water until I was satiated.

And then I stood in the center of the isle, scrubbing every inch of my skin with antibacterial soap alternating between lathering and rinsing with the gallon jugs, sloughing off the layer of dust that had built on my skin.

When I emerged, draped in clean clothing, I felt new hope. I took my time on the ride to Santa Monica, searching for any sign of survivors.

And again, I found none.

But I did find a house on the shoreline that utilized solar power. Leave it to the environmentalists to build a self-sufficient house. I had electricity and running water and a propane stove. And the best thing about the house? No dead bodies. The place was empty, clean and by some miracle, it was unlocked when I found it.

A mall and several shopping centers were within walking distance, and I had enough supplies at my disposal to last a couple years without going farther than Santa Monica.

It took me a while to clean up the neighborhood and I glanced back at the funeral pyre; the work I did to finally settle in here. Cleaning up decayed corpses, the meager remains of the dead and bringing them to that small building, then the lighter fluid and the sudden whoosh when the match hit the pile.

It's been burning all day, fire licking the sky, sending thick black plumes of smoke into the atmosphere and layering a stench of cooking flesh over the landscape.

I turned back toward the ocean, the memories receding again, lifting the weight off my chest, but not quite all the way. I still have one more adventure.

One that strikes terror in my heart.

Seven months of traveling, of scrapes, of bruises, of sores and bone-weary exhaustion, only helped to increase that fear.

Movement under my hand pulls my attention from the flat sea.

“I know, I know. I’ll head back in a little bit.”

I run my fingers over my stretched swollen belly, trying to soothe the baby kicking at my ribcage and I can’t help but wonder, will the air kill her too?