

The evening sky is glowing in ice cream sundae hues through the lounge window. Natalie would once have seen its beauty, but now all she sees are light rays doing their thing. This pandemic has removed everything good and ripped up her love for this world.

When she first moved here back in twenty fourteen the place had seemed idyllic – four remote cottages set against the winding river with the soaring bridge spanning it through space. The bridge continues to soar of course, but whereas she once thought it resembled a bird's wing, now all she can see in the curve is a blackened and dissected rib.

A rising and falling whine of blades cuts loudly through the sky, and the dreaded red helicopter passes overhead. The crew will be on their way to collect and isolate the latest positive test prion victim. On the ground, in hazmat suits and armed with stun guns, medics and enforcers will round up and forcibly test all those within a half mile radius. Cleaning teams will strip and scrub the victim's property; it takes immense heat to kill off prion PrP^{sc}, but the science shows that it can at least be washed away.

Unfortunately Natalie knows a little too much about the hell of a positive test result. It's a death sentence pure and simple. No way to sugar coat it. She sympathises with the latest poor soul who's wondering if it's just diarrhoea they are experiencing or worse, waiting to see if when they spit into the tube the crystals turn red...

Red the colour of the helicopter.

Red the colour of the medieval plague crosses painted on doors.

She can see why so many of them don't even call the copter. The government's chief medical advisor continues to say that a second test is always needed and folk mustn't jump to conclusions.

But everyone knows that's a lie.

She can see why so many just jump from that black rib bridge instead.

A knock at the door rouses her from dark thoughts. She crosses the room and through the frosted panes she can make out the form of Shona her nearest neighbour, and beside her a much taller man. She unlatches the door and steps outside. The visitors are latex gloved, masked and bearing negative green crystal test phials. Still, no point in taking chances, it's safer outside - the prion can get washed off surfaces in the rain they say.

'Hey Natty,' Shona's voice is trying to be bright but falls short. 'Just checking up on you hun. This is my nephew Josh. You've met before I know. He's a scientist if you recall - at the waste water treatment plant at Grendlade. I'm hoping he might be able to get me a job there -reading samples.'

Natalie takes a step back. It's instinctive and she doesn't mean to be rude, but this horror prion survives in crap, everyone knows that. Josh holds up his hands in appeasement but then winces, dropping them quickly, as an odd corded necklace just visible above his collar flashes

and buzzes simultaneously. ‘No need to be alarmed, the plant is as safe as houses these days, and my prototype fashion accessory here is just reminding me to keep my hands away from my face. He tucks in his chin and looks down at the device around his neck. ‘We’re all testing them. The hope is we can get kids wearing them to stop the hand to mouth transmission. It’s just a noise and a mild electric shock at the end of the day, whenever a hand breaks the six inch gap.’ He smiles apologetically, ‘It may seem archaic – cruel even. But desperate times call for desperate measures. Don’t you agree?’

There’s no time for her to reply. So many ‘*what ifs*’ stem from the idea of that necklace . Josh has no idea that he’s stumbled into the brackish hell of her weeping dreams.

Rapidly blinking her embarrassment and discomfort, Shona repositions the conversation. ‘Yes, Josh tells me the government are telling us the truth about the drinking water. There should be no more outbreaks now the new technology is in place – *ozzy* something and super filters they’re using.’

‘We were completely on the back foot when this whole thing broke,’ Josh is wide eyed and intense, obviously attuned to his subject . ‘We had no idea that a prion could spread in this way. We’d never seen it before, and then no one wanted to work with sewage and the advanced PPE we needed was still being developed. But now we’ve cracked it with ultrafiltration, strong chlorination and reverse osmosis. All those billions spent on installing the technology are saving *so* many lives.’ He pauses and his hands head up to his chin as if he’s about to rub it, but then they drop quickly as the black lariat around his neck lets out a high pitched squeal. He smiles apologetically but then turns sage, ‘I think we all need to be grateful that we don’t live in Africa, India or even China now it’s spreading there. I don’t know about you but I can’t watch those images – no clean water, no care... and dying like rabid dogs...’

All three stand in silence. Around them the evening light is peachy soft and insects scrape and chirp as if the world had never changed. A distant car can be heard moving along the upper highway. Natalie feels some relief in the fact that it has passed through, it’s still quiet here because it’s cut off, but both she and Sho live in fear of the increasingly common opportunistic thieves.

Shona hangs her head. She can’t look Natalie in the eye and her silent tears have reached the end of her nose. She talks as she stares down. ‘We just didn’t know how much we needed those poor dying people in those poor countries did we? And now it’s hit China things are just gonna get worse.’

Josh nods his agreement, and his aunt sighs loudly before continuing. ‘I mean just look at the state of America, of the whole world. I don’t have a job now in hospitality and neither do you in catering Nat. People just don’t want to run the risk of touching stuff or using the john in hotels or theatres any more. But we didn’t know our whole economy would collapse without all those people working for jack shit in sweatshops did we? She rolls her eyes and clenches an unclenches her fists in agitation. ‘No government ever bit the bullet and told us the truth. We need them. We’re not an island!’

Natalie feels overwhelmed and paces her yard, studying her shoe prints in the dust, trying to work out what she actually believes and what she doesn't. Since the time of the covid 19, there have been too many people with too many theories just selling lies and misinformation. This disease is everything, there is nothing else left in the whole world.

She knows that Shona and Josh are smarter than her, both clever people. Shona has told her before that it's wrong that the president has closed the international border, and that disease free immigrants from third world countries should be allowed to come here. Natalie was raised as a good Christian and she suspects that this sounds like the sort of thing that Jesus might have said too. She's not sure that that's the answer though? Shouldn't the solution be properly screened drinking water treatment in their own countries? What's for them here anyway? Huge swathes of Americans are just packing up and leaving the cities to try and survive off grid. Places like New York and Washington are emptying at an alarming rate. Mountains of plastic bottles, the reminders of the phase when drinking the tap water was a disease lottery, lie uncollected in their streets. There are too few young workers left in Turkey and Malaysia to recycle them anymore. Rubbish is piling up. Food is on ration with every corner store that's left now employing an armed guard.

She glances over at Shona. Despite their differences, and the fact that Sho must be nearly old enough to be her mom, she's been a good friend. Just last week she helped Natalie to dig over her back yard to plant potatoes and French beans. It's lucky they're so isolated really, if you'd stuck those crops in nearer to the city, they'd have been dug up within twenty four hours. Since Ben had gone and Cal had packed his bag and slammed the door because of her fateful decision, Shona has been her only friend. She needs her and she won't be picking an argument over politics.

'Do you think the world will ever be normal again Shona? Natalie is aware that her voice is thin and as yellow as the setting sun.

A sniff, a little smile and an exaggerated raising of the brows. 'We have to hope don't we? I mean without hope there's nothing. My chink of light is that there will be a vaccine soon and I hold onto that.'

'I think your hope will soon be justified.' Josh gives a small smile and cocks his head to one side. 'The problem the researchers have had is that it's hard to set up an immune response against a protein that's so similar to the normal form found in all our bodies. Peptide prion vaccine research is almost there though I'm told. A vaccine for all of this seems likely very soon in my opinion.'

Always too late, thinks Natalie. The vaccine, the aversion therapy necklace, the ability to remove the prions from the water...all too late for her and what she used to have. She glances over at Shona, she's saying something to Josh and they're laughing. It's nice for her that he's become like a surrogate son since his folks passed several years back. There's love there and she knows how important that is.

Holding her thoughts of love tight she calls out to her friend. ‘Hey, Sho... what you said about me not having a job, that’s not actually true. I’ve found something that I can do and I start tomorrow.’

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Twenty four hours have passed since the evening chat with Shona and Josh, and to Natalie it feels more like twenty four years. She is driving home from her shift at the emergency hospice (recently converted from the gym and sports centre of the local county high school). The experience has drained her in mind and body and she’s still reeling from the fact that they’d even let her nurse those poor kids. Hadn’t they said at the first phone interview that anyone who’d lost a child in the last few years would be allocated the care of older prion victims only? She imagines that they’re just grateful for any applicants these days. After all, cleaning up the contaminated wastes of folks who are struggling to eat or understand or move is hardly a dream job, even in this time of pandemic unemployment.

It was the death of her little boy Ben that led her to today’s healthcare job on the children’s ward anyway – she only wanted to deal with the children. If she hadn’t been allowed to spend the last ten hours sweating inside that ultra -protective hazmat suit, placating and soothing those poor innocent babies, then she certainly wouldn’t be coming back tomorrow.

Today’s shift has truly been her hair shirt. Every little body repositioned, every dirty diaper changed and every agitated soul soothed has been a painful atonement for her sin. No medieval saint could have purged their self-hatred more fully than she’s done today. Natalie reflects that the TV folk are happy to show the hideous nature of third world children dying in distress from prion PrP^{sc} disease. It’s funny how they’re not so keen to show that hell inflicted on home grown, all American kids.

It’s curious.

Natalie knows the details of course. Nothing seen today was new. She’s never forgotten the awful muscle spasms that had thrown her Benny into grimacing flashes of agony, and she will never forget the technique to easing them with gently massaging hands.

Every task she’s undertaken today, from feeding milky potions in tiny sips to gathering up shit stained sheets for incineration – every sweltering minute spent in that enclosed suit, she’s done for Ben. She’s done it all because of how she failed him.

Natalie grips the steering wheel a little tighter as she approaches the river bend. Soon her house will be in sight and she’ll be home. Part of her hopes the looters have dug up her potatoes and smashed in her door - that would all just be part of what she deserves for her failure as a mother. Failure to use her common sense and realise that the world is fundamentally bad. Failure think critically about the government when they told her that the children would be safe in schools – that risks would be identified and eradicated.

Cal had got it right.

She had got it wrong.

Ben had got sick because some other kid had got the prion disease diarrhoea and his momma hadn't noticed or tested.

Ben had died aged five. Cal, distraught, had blamed her for having a head full of stupid and had left her as well.

Natalie turns into her drive; her front door is intact and the side gate to the potato patch is still shut and locked. She sighs aloud and looks west, up at that arc of flying bridge.

'One day,' she thinks. *'One day...'*