

Fictional account of a bioengineered disease and its aftermath.

The Beginning of the End

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THE BEGINNING OF THE END

a short story by

Kurt O'Dell

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Chapter One - Unleashed

In retrospect, I would have given practically anything to be anywhere else on Earth when it happened. As it turned out, I was at Ground Zero.

Working as the Director of IT for a small, rural hospital had its perks, I suppose. The aging facility sat nestled in the mountains of central West Virginia, an imposing red brick structure four stories tall. Originally operated by Catholic Nuns it had been in private hands for over a decade, and over the years the decline of the local population had a dramatic effect on the financial viability of the establishment. Everyone felt that bankruptcy might be inevitable, but we continued doing our jobs as best we could in the interim.

As it turned out we needn't have concerned ourselves.

Largely autonomous in my job description, I came and went pretty well as I pleased, and I enjoyed getting things done to drag the facility kicking and screaming into the modern world of microcomputers, at least as the severely limited budget would permit. Every weekday I made the half hour drive to the facility on the curvy back roads of the state in my Subaru Outback wagon. Trips on icy roads in the winter proved interesting, as might be expected, as the surrounding forests often kept the sunlight from reaching the road.

At the hospital I also helped out with numerous other tasks as required in addition to my more normal duties of keeping the computers operational. Most of the staff wore several hats, so to speak, and had numerous peripheral duties to attend in addition to their formal work. Since the guys on the maintenance crew knew that I had an extensive martial arts background, I had been asked on a couple of previous occasions to assist in dealing with combative patients who needed restrained long enough to have medications administered. I suppose it was in light of this that I really didn't think much about it when I was called to the hospital emergency room to assist with a combative patient, the call ringing into my fourth floor office shortly after I had arrived at work one morning.

My descent of the stairwell was at its usual speedy gait, since given the state of general disrepair of the elevators I used them as infrequently as possible. As I was descending the last flight of stairs I became increasingly aware that what I was about to encounter was anything but routine, as I could hear voices raised to a fever pitch and the sound of objects crashing to the floor. Still, when I arrived in the emergency room I was completely unprepared for what awaited me. I anticipated nothing more than an addict or drunk needing medicated.

As I entered the emergency room I was taken aback by the scene; it looked like something out of a bad teen slasher movie. Several nurses and two of the maintenance guys were attempting to strap a patient to a gurney and were meeting with precious little success.

My eyes fell to the patient and my blood ran cold. It was an older gentleman, covered in blood, snarling and gnashing his teeth violently as he fought against those trying to restrain him. His eyes were bloodshot, his pupils constricted, and his skin an ashen gray color. The veins were standing out visibly on all of his exposed body, dark against his corpse-like pallor.

He glared at me briefly in his wild fit of rage; it was then that I realized that I knew him.

I froze for a moment, unsure what was expected of me, transfixed by the scene. It was the Chief Maintenance Officer, Greg, who broke my trance shouting, "Get the hell over here and help me get this thing restrained!"

'Thing.' I thought it an interesting choice of description for a patient in need.

Greg was the old codger heading up the maintenance crew, a motley assortment of rough-around-the-edges guys. These were the kind of guys you wanted to keep on your side, especially if it came to a fight.

As I rushed to the side of the gurney I noticed two nurses on the floor, unconscious and bleeding. One other member of the maintenance crew, Patrick, was out cold in the corner, slumped in a mangled heap and bleeding from a nasty head wound.

"What the hell happened?" I shouted to no one in particular as I attempted to pry a nurse's wrist out of the steely grip of the very patient she was trying to assist.

It was the ER doctor, Royce, who took it upon himself to respond. "We're really not sure. The patient is William Milam, a local gentleman, and his wife told us that he just returned yesterday from a trip to Africa. They had been sitting at the breakfast table this morning and he was complaining he wasn't feeling well. His nose started to bleed and they couldn't get the bleeding stopped, so she called an ambulance. The emergency medical techs on the ambulance that brought him in look like hell. By the time they arrived at his residence he had become highly combative and was even attempting to bite them as they loaded him into the ambulance."

"Bite them?" I inquired?

"Yeah, he managed to bite two of the nurses before we could get him under control. His blood pressure is elevated tremendously and he hasn't spoken a word since he arrived. All we can get out of him are snarls, grunts, and an occasional scream."

Right on cue our patient let out a shrill scream and lunged once more at Greg; only the intervention of Royce and myself prevented it.

"Glad you're here today, by the way", Royce admitted. "We needed the extra muscle."

"This is bizarre behavior for nothing more than a nosebleed..." and as my voice trailed off, my mind began to race.

Just returned from Africa. Spontaneous bleeding and mental disorientation. *Ebola*? I wouldn't think it likely, as I wasn't aware of that kind of violent outburst in an *Ebola* infection. Still, it wouldn't hurt to mention it to the doctor and get his take on it. Royce was relatively new to the facility, and his wife, also a physician, worked upstairs in the walk-in clinic. Royce typically came to work with a Superman t-shirt underneath his scrubs and had a hell of a sense of humor.

I snapped back to reality as we managed to get the straps secured on the patient. He stared up at me through hate-filled eyes, his body writhing grotesquely against the straps as he let out another roar of anger and frustration.

The emergency room was a complete disaster. Carts overturned, semi-conscious bodies strewn about, and medical tools and supplies underfoot. Our patient caused quite a mess.

I turned as I heard a low groan from the corner of the room. It seemed Patrick was finally coming around after his ordeal. If the volume of blood on the floor around his head was any indication, he was going to have a massive headache.

“Pat, you okay?”

Another low groan. Deeper. Throatier. Angry?

“Pat?”

A sound more akin to a snarl erupted from the corner of the room. I jumped, and I wasn't alone.

Greg interjected, “Damn it, Pat, stop screwing around. That's not funny. You need bandaged up.”

Patrick turned to face us, and I could see instantly he was in trouble, as were we. He had the same look of insane anger as the patient currently strapped to the gurney. His skin was losing its color before our very eyes and I could see his pupils visibly constricting. I involuntarily took a step backwards. It was nothing personal, but I wanted to be in the clear regardless of what I decided I was going to do about what was about to unfold.

Again my mind started racing in a vain attempt to understand what I was seeing. It just didn't seem realistic that an infection could spread throughout a person's body in the scant few minutes since Pat had been knocked unconscious. There is no known disease in existence that virulent. Could the condition be a reaction to some kind of chemical agent?

Another low snarl and Pat was on his feet and charging. He targeted Greg, but I intervened as he came rushing by me. He was in a low crouch as he passed and I managed to drop an elbow into his spine and send him sprawling to the floor. He slid to a stop right in front of Greg's terrified form and started to gain his feet. I leapt onto his back and managed to keep him down, slamming his body into the floor with terrific force. It was all that I could do to keep him under control. He was lifting all two

hundred pounds of my weight, determined to get up off of the floor. I could feel his body twisting and writhing under my weight as he struggled.

It was like trying to restrain a wild animal.

“Get something to tie him down!” I shouted. “Someone get a sedative and put him out.”

I turned my head and was met by a roomful of blank, terrified stares.

“Are you people deaf? I need a restraint and a sedative for this guy, stat!”

Greg raced out of the room and managed to get another gurney brought in from the adjoining room as Patrick snarled and continued to struggle beneath my weight. A nurse brought down from another floor who had escaped the *mêlée* managed to get a good healthy dose of Haldol injected into him and within a few minutes I could feel the struggling lessen. We hoisted his limp form onto a gurney and tied him down as Mullins continued to scream and growl from the other side of the room.

I addressed Doctor Royce calmly and directly, my hand on his shoulder as I spoke, “Get anyone who was bitten or who might have had contact with his blood or saliva restrained. I believe him to be extremely contagious.”

“Restrained?” he asked. “Are you kidding me?”

“Have you been absent from the room the past several minutes, or is there something I am missing? I don’t know what is causing this condition, but I damned sure don’t want any more of the infected running loose.”

“Pat’s strange and aggressive reaction could have been caused by the blow to his head when he fell. Concussion, maybe.”

“Bullshit. You don’t believe that any more than I do.” I could see in his eyes that he was grasping at straws, hoping for a rational explanation to what he had witnessed.

“You have a more plausible explanation?”

“I’m working on it. In the meantime, you might want to consider a dose of Haldol for your original patient before he either breaks the straps or manages to cut his own hands off by straining against them.”

We turned once more towards the hate-filled eyes of the old gentleman still straining against the straps, a few thin nylon bands separating us from renewed violence. Royce shuddered briefly before speaking. “Point taken,” he said, and ambled off towards the narcotics cabinet.

Patrick was still unconscious from the sedative and personnel worked to treat his injuries as best they could. More gurneys were brought in and the two injured nurses were strapped down also and subsequently treated. The ambulance personnel were checked

for wounds and cleared to leave after none were found.

I checked myself over for possible fluid contamination and found none. Still, being part of the 'better-safe-than-sorry crowd', I went out to my Subaru Outback and retrieved my gear bag, a go-anywhere-do-anything satchel designed to carry everything I might need in the event of an automobile breakdown, getting stranded in bad weather, or a natural disaster. I always keep a change of clothes in the bag among the other items, so I just hauled the entire bag back inside the facility. I quickly jogged up the stairwell and found myself back at my office.

I shut and locked the door, quickly changing into the spare set of clothes and bagging the others in a spare trash bag. I returned to my desk and prepared to call my wife to let her know about the strange events of the morning.

I was picking up the phone to dial when I heard a bloodcurdling scream echo up the stairwell.

I froze. I listened.

I jumped as my telephone rang. It was Doctor Royce calling from the emergency room.

“Okay, what the hell is going on? The nurses are showing the same symptoms as the other two patients, namely being violent, angry, and combative. They were trying to bite me as I examined them, for God’s sake. What are we dealing with here? You know more than you are saying. I could see it on your face earlier. Tell me what...”

I could hear the stark fear in his voice as something interrupted him.

“Shit, he’s broken free!”

A low snarl and the phone went dead.

I quickly rose to my feet as the sounds of a fight echoed up to my office through the stairwell. My mind raced, as this might well be what I most feared.

I should point out that it is a violation of hospital policy to carry a concealed weapon on the premises, so in the interest of staying employed I normally don’t. I do carry a defensive knife, an Emerson Combat karambit in my right front pocket. The karambit is a curved blade knife, sharpened on the inside curve, with a finger ring at the opposite end to allow the knife to be spun like a circular saw blade. Luckily, my bag also contained my Para-Ordnance 45 caliber pistol and several spare magazines loaded with Federal Hydra-Shoks, an excellent defensive pistol round. I had a license to carry a handgun and generally did so anytime I was not actually inside the hospital.

I thought to myself, ‘I really hate to consider this but I just might need it. If I use this thing inside this facility I will be looking for another job in short order and will possibly go to jail. In the interest of fairness, however, it does beat being dead by a wide margin.’

I slid my Galco paddle holster, also tucked into my bag, into the waistline of my khaki cargo pants and chamber-checked the pistol. It was loaded and ready to go. I thumbed on the safety and slid the Para into the holster. The spare magazines went into an offside cargo pocket of my trousers reserved for just such emergencies.

More screams from the lower levels made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

I zipped up the bag and started gathering up the few items I bring to work with me daily.

Screams again, more pronounced in volume, and from outside the facility this time.

I crept to the window and chanced a look out. Blood-soaked patients were crossing the parking lot and attacking cars as they drove by. I saw an elderly couple dragged from their car by the infected and turned my face away from the window as they closed in on them.

'That's it', I thought, 'I am so out of here. I have a wife and child at home who have no idea what is happening and will need me there.'

I snapped up the gear bag and slung it over my shoulder; my daily carry bag went over the same shoulder. I kicked off the lights in my office and cautiously entered the hallway outside, locking the office door behind me.

I opened the door at the top of the stairs just a crack. I could hear the snarls and growls growing louder and heavy footfalls approaching, and believed that the infected were already in the stairwell cutting off my means of escape from the building.

I backed away from the stairwell and closed the door, about two seconds away from panic. I thought to myself, 'How am I going to get out of here?'

The next thought arrived out of the blue, as I remembered seeing a disused stairwell leading from the fourth floor directly to ground floor. It was just down the hall and I was never aware of anyone using it the entire time that I had worked there.

At least there might be fewer infected coming up that route. I should have enough ammo to cover that if it becomes necessary to defend myself against infection.

I rushed down the hall and opened the door to the disused stairwell. No sounds emanated from it. 'So far, so good,' I thought.

I began my descent with my weak side hand on the railing, as I felt there was no sense in taking the chance on falling under the current circumstances. My stronger primary hand rested on the butt of the handgun. I hadn't cleared leather yet but I wasn't far from it either. I reached the bottom of the stairs without incident and looked out the heavy glass exterior door as my heart pounded. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears and a cold sweat covered my scalp.

The infected were everywhere: on the hospital grounds, hanging from passing cars, and

running throughout the neighborhood. They attacked anyone and anything moving.

I thought to myself, ‘This is a hell of a situation. How am I going to get out to my car? I suppose I should thank God for remote door locks.’

I readied myself as best I could against what might be coming. Remote for the car in hand, I flung open the door and began to sprint for the parking lot. Immediately I became a target and several of the infected began to run towards me. Within seconds I was closing on the car and the infected were closing on me. One was coming up from the parking lot on a direct intercept course, and I was afraid he would reach me before I could reach the relative safety of the car.

I cleared leather and stopped long enough to empty two rounds into his head at a distance of twenty feet. I realized immediately that while that was probably my only option at the time, it wasn’t the ideal one. Every infected within audible distance turned to see what the disturbance was, targeted me as a threat, and began moving towards me at breakneck speed.

I popped the locks on the Subaru with the remote and practically dove in headfirst. As I was preparing to close the door I swiveled around in my seat and managed to get off another double-tap on an approaching infected. He dropped instantly from the shots and was practically decapitated from his collision with the heavy bullets. I swiveled into driving position, slammed the door, locked the car doors up tight, started the engine and stomped the accelerator. My tires screamed as I cornered out of the lot, weaving a path between the infected when possible and over them when left no other option. They clung to the car, beating on the windows and spider-webbing them with their bare fists. I swung the car back and forth madly, throwing them off and hearing the crunch of bone under the tires of the car as I passed over them, feeling the car lurching and bucking from the obstacles.

Within a few more seconds or so I was well beyond their reach, but the sight I beheld in the rear-view mirror as I sped off made my blood run cold.

They were everywhere. Men, women, and children. The young and the elderly.

I picked up my cell phone and dialed my wife’s cell. She answered on the third ring.

“Hello.”

“Sweetheart, I need you to do something for me.”

A tentative response from the other end of the line, “Okay. Shoot.”

“I did just that a few minutes ago.”

“Come again?”

“Sorry. That was a very bad joke. I need you to get a few things done, and quickly.”

First, get our kid out of school. Give them whatever bullshit excuse you have to. Next, get to the grocery store, a convenience store, wherever you can find bottled water and buy as much as you can quickly load into the car. Get some food staples that will keep for a while, preferably without refrigeration. Extra canned food, soups, and such would be good. I'll be stopping by the grocery on the way home and picking up some things there myself."

"What the hell is this about? The Y2K scare was over a long time ago."

"You remember our discussing the worst possible scenario? Well, it's unfolding right now, and I unfortunately got to see the start of it happen first-hand."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. Dead serious."

"Okay, now I get it. I am putting my coat on right now and on the way out the door. What's exactly are we dealing with?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "Contagion of some kind. I was initially speculating *Ebola* or some new variant thereof but I'm really not sure. It could be chemical. Biological. Whatever it is, it is incredibly contagious and the incubation time can be measured in minutes."

Dead silence on the other end of the phone.

"Sweetheart?"

"I'm here," she said. "Just a little freaked out. We've talked about this possibility but I guess I wasn't quite prepared for it to really happen."

"Me either. I should be home in about 30 minutes. You realize better than anyone that we might not have a lot of time. Expedience is sort of a necessity right now until we figure out what we are up against."

"No kidding. I'll be back to the house with our kid and what provisions I can manage by the time you get home."

"I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you, too."

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