

## Special Delivery

I like to fancy myself as a Robin Hood figure at the end of the world. I take from the haves and give to the have-nots for a small price. At least, that's how I used to be.

Let me rewind for a moment. It's been five years since the Alpha Virus swept the world and killed most of us. Only the luckiest, unluckiest, and sturdiest sons of bitches outlasted the plague, but even the sturdy ones will have their bodies fail them eventually. They will need whatever passes for a doctor now and whatever medicine they can get their hands on. That's where I come in. See, I was a pharmacist back before the virus. Well, I worked in a pharmacy, but I can round up these days. I know my lorazepam from clorazepate. If you don't, then I'm more a doctor than you are. But doctoring isn't my line of work. I prefer a more hands-on approach.

Medicine is hard to find these days. It's not like we have gasoline to power massive supply chains anymore. Where do you get drugs when big pharma went extinct years ago? From me of course. My legs are the supply chain. Where I get my supply is a little more complicated.

If you were more than a tyke when Alpha hit, you'd remember that everyone had a veritable drug store between their bathroom cabinet, closets, and purses. Once the pharmacies had been picked clean in the riots, these hidden places became the treasure chests of my profession. It's not like the dead will miss their expired ibuprofen or their not-so-secret stash of stimulants.

That is the tricky bit, though. Searching the homes of the living is a great way to get shot, so I frequent the haunted homes of the permanently-quarantined. The hollowed-out houses of those kind enough to rot alone so as not to get the rest of us sick. I honor their sacrifice by pillaging their junk drawers for left-over lidocaine. The easy spots were raided years ago, so I

have to get more creative. Long-abandoned rural towns or homes with higher risk were jobs only a seasoned professional or true idiot would take on. Being at least one of those, I accepted the challenge.

Take for instance the day I cleaned out the Merriweathers' place. The rain was plowing down. I took one last deep breath before putting on my respirator and goggles then stepping up to the front door. I'm no slouch, but my body's a little slender for battering deadbolts open. I might pick a lock or two if I'm bored, but I typically prefer unlocking a window with a hammer. This time someone saved me from having to do either by kicking the door in before I got there. I sighed, dashing my hopes of being the first to rummage through the nice family's belongings. I reassured myself before going inside that perhaps my competition was a moron and had prioritized jewels or spoiled food.

The Merriweathers must have had many fond memories in their fully-renovated kitchen and living room. Dusty original paintings adorned the few walls the open architecture allowed. A gas fireplace rested dormant in the corner. I sighed at the sight of my first clue as to why such a nice place with an open door remained intact. On the well-loved living room furniture were four corpses in an embrace. Charming in a morbid sort of way. Less charming were the likely diseases from those corpses. This wasn't my first rodeo, though. I could do a thorough cleaning afterward and probably not die. I came this far, so I figured I'd see it through. I jostled my respirator slightly to make sure it was on properly and made my way to the kitchen.

I searched in the usual spots. A bottle of acetaminophen and antacids among the batteries, rubber bands, and tangled headphones in a drawer of the kitchen. Bandages and antibiotic ointment in a depleted first aid kit in the closet. I scored most of a 90-day supply of birth control under the mattress in a teen's room, plus a handful of sertraline in the smaller bathroom. The

primary bathroom sported a suspicious amount of sildenafil—surely for blood pressure and not its more salacious applications—and finasteride for Mr. Merriweather’s thinning hairline. I like to think the plastic bag of methylphenidate was either for Mrs. Merriweather’s focus or for fun. Good for her either way. All decent finds for me as well.

I was on my way out and considering how to fence the finasteride when I remembered to check their nightstands. There were some unusable condoms on one side, but what really caught my eye was the yellow prescription bottle on the other side. It seemed to glow with a golden halo before I even read the name: Levothyroxine, 200 micrograms.

I gently cupped the bottle in my hands, instinctively checking my surroundings to make sure I wasn’t being followed. The other meds would go in my pack. This was going in my pocket. I knew I would take that one to either my intended recipient or to my grave. I ditched any further exploration and dipped out of the house. I nearly forgot to wash myself and my clothes before heading home, but managed to half-ass a clean-up before pumping my legs as fast as they’d take me back to town. I’d found it at last. I finally had my bargaining chip.

My first stop was not at home or for food or even to my usual drop sites. I went directly to the hospital, pushing past protesting staff and into an exam room. I yanked the door open to the shock of both Dr. Connors and his patient, who had his pants down on the ground.

“Jesus Christ, Ron, at least learn to knock,” Connors said.

His patient pulled up his pants. I stared deep into Connors’ stupid face.

“Levothyroxine, 200 micrograms.”

He looked as if he had seen a ghost. He stood up shakily and stepped toward me.

“Let me see it,” he demanded.

“Do the damn surgery and I’ll let you have it,” I shot back.

“I have to see if it’s the real deal.”

“You know me. It’s real.”

“I won’t pick up a scalpel until you show me the fucking pills, Ron.”

I groaned and showed him the bottle, opening the top to let him inspect it. He collapsed into his chair.

“My god. You found them,” he said.

“Yes, I’m an angel. Now when are we trading your daughter’s health for the health of mine?”

“Don’t make it sound so crass, Ron. You know the surgery is risky and we don’t have the supplies for it.”

“Until I have the one thing that will keep your daughter alive. See how it sucks to have that withheld from you?”

Conners sighed. He turned to his patient politely.

“I apologize, Sean. Do you mind if I leave and return in just a moment?”

“Uh,” the patient said, eyes darting between the two of us. “Sure. Go ahead.”

“Thank you.”

Conners grabbed my arm and dragged me outside the exam room and towards his office, where he slammed his door closed. He glared at me, and I glared back.

“What’s your game, Ron?” he asked.

“Exactly what I said. You do the heart surgery on Anna, and I give you the thyroid meds that will save Tanya’s life. Don’t you think it would be nice if they could keep going on their play dates together while you play doctor?”

“I am a doctor.”

“So do your damn job.”

“We can’t do heart surgery out here, Ron! We barely have electricity. Hell, this building is held together with chewing gum and duct tape.”

“So why did you say you’d do it if you got the damn levothyroxine, Dan?”

He fell silent and looked down ashamed.

“I didn’t think you’d ever find it. And if you did, I needed to know you would bring it back.”

I stepped toward him and leaned into his face. He gulped.

“I kept my side of the bargain, Dan. It’s your turn to pay up.”

“Technically it’s not the right dosage,” he muttered.

“Then cut the damn pill in half. Thank me for giving you double the supply. I think that means I get two surgeries.”

“How about I make the first one a lobotomy? Because you’re fucking insane.”

“Then you ought to keep me from doing something insane.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise. And I actually keep my promises.”

Conners sighed again, exasperated. He met my gaze firmly.

“On one condition then,” he said.

“Christ, was the miracle medicine not enough?”

“This part is for your daughter, Ron. We don’t exactly have anesthesia supplies. If I write down what I need, can you get it?”

“Where the hell am I supposed to get that?”

“I don’t know where you find any of this shit, Ron. Do you want to do this right or do you want me to knock her out the old fashioned way?”

I grabbed Connors by the lapels and stared into his frightened eyes. I felt satisfied that he was telling the truth, so I dropped him back to his feet.

“Fine. Give me a grocery list and I’ll get them to you.”

Connors gulped and took a few deep breaths. He regained his composure, wrote down a list of supplies, and made steady eye contact again.

“Look,” he said, “I will do the surgery if you insist, but it will be risky. She might not make it.”

“She won’t make it without the surgery either. What’s the difference?”

“You might have longer with her if you just wait for the inevitable instead of forcing it.”

I swung myself around to walk out of the office.

“It isn’t inevitable yet,” I replied.

I brushed off the security as I stomped out the exit. Once I left, I scanned through the necessary components for the surgery. I closed my eyes. I could only get those at a hospital, and most major hospitals had already been picked clean to the bone. I knew there was only one option in a 100-mile radius: Central General.

That was the first hospital in the state to close down four years ago when every patient and staff member died from Alpha. It was condemned, boarded up, and sealed to quarantine whatever particularly virulent strain had taken it, and the corpses inside, down. There were even obviously fake rumors that there were zombies there. Nevertheless, if the four bodies in the Merriweather’s house were dangerous, this would be treacherous. I’d need to pack many more precautions, as well as gear to break in.

But that could wait. I needed to see Anna. I attached the sildenafil to a dead drop under a park bench and made my way to the spots I typically fenced my findings. I was able to haggle a woman out of her nice shoes for the sertraline and traded the birth control to another woman for, ironically, a dozen eggs. Calling it a day, I flipped the shoes for a week of groceries. I had pancakes on my mind, and I knew Anna would be excited.

When I finally got to our house, the rain had died down to a mild sprinkle as the sun began to set. I knocked on the door and entered quietly.

“Papa!”

There she was. The one person left in this world left that could bring a smile to my face. My late wife and I always said Anna was the only good thing to happen to us since Alpha. When I heard her voice coming from her bed in the living room, I turned toward her and showed her the groceries.

“Guess what we’re having tonight,” I said.

“Hmmm,” she pondered hard. “Pancakes!”

I sat on the bed next to her and booped her nose with my finger.

“Bingo! You’re so smart.”

“Just like Papa!”

“Nah, you’re much smarter than me.”

“Can I help make pancakes this time? I promise I’ll stand the whole time.”

“You don’t have to do that, Bug. Let me just make them tonight.”

She crossed her arms and huffed before she smiled at me again.

“Okay. I guess,” she said.

I tousled her hair, much to her chagrin, and stood up to make dinner. Midway through, she cleared her throat and spoke softly.

“Can we read tomorrow, Papa?”

I bit my lip. I turned around with a sad smile on my face and spoke softly back to her.

“I’m sorry, Bug, but I have to go back to work tomorrow. It’s very important.”

She slumped in her bed and looked down.

“Okay,” she relented.

She winced, grunted, and clutched her chest. I ran from the kitchen to the living room, ready to perform chest compressions. She put a hand up.

“I’m okay,” she said with a faint smile. “Just hurts a little.”

I sat down beside her and pulled her into my chest.

“I love you, little one,” I reassured her. “Dr. Connors is looking into ways of helping you feel better soon. Just need you to hold out a little longer, okay?”

“Okay, Papa,” she answered between breaths, clutching to me tightly.

We ate pancakes together and I put her to bed soon after the night took over the day. I assembled my entering tools for the following day when I would strike out for Central General. It would take at least two days by foot both ways, so I rationed out six days of food as well. Anything else I needed I felt confident I could scavenge for when I got there. Lastly, I made a visit to our neighbor, Sasha, a gentle old woman who looked after Anna when I was gone for more than a day. She sighed when she opened the door to me.

“You know, that girl of yours is not long for this world, Ronnie. I would know because neither am I. She needs you at home more than she needs whatever you go running around the world for.”



“I got Conners to do the surgery.”

“You what?” she asked. “Okay, come inside and explain.”

I followed her into her home, where she slowly lowered herself into a seat at her kitchen table.

“How did you get Conners to operate? Or should I say ‘lalala’ so I’m not considered a witness?”

“I got him the thyroid meds Tanya needs, so if I just get him the supplies he needs for the surgery, he’ll do the rest.”

“Did you give him the meds already?”

“Of course not. He doesn’t get those until he holds up his end of the bargain.”

“Tsk-tsk,” she tutted. “You are a foul little man. But I can’t argue that it gets results.”

“Will you look after Anna until I get back with what he needs for the surgery?”

“Of course I will, but I meant what I said earlier, Ronnie. She needs you more than she needs extra time.”

“If I get my way, she’ll have both soon,” I said, turning to leave. “Thank you for looking after her, Sasha.”

“That girl’s an angel. I’ll forgive her for making her father into a demon to protect her.”

I said nothing and walked out her door. I quietly entered our own home and made my way to my bedroom, not that I anticipated sleeping at all that night. I surprised myself with a pleasant three hours of shut-eye before the sun came up. After making breakfast for Anna, I gently nudged her awake. She smiled at me as she opened her eyes.

“Hi, Papa.”

“Morning, Bug. Here are some eggs.”

“Are we going to eat together?” she asked.

“We can do that.”

I offered her a plate and she took it, picking at the eggs quietly with her fork.

“Are you going to leave today?” she asked tenderly.

“I’ll be back in a jiffy. Five days tops.”

She frowned slightly.

“Do you have to go?” she asked.

She coughed loudly and winced as she caught her breath. I rubbed her back and felt my resolve rekindle.

“I have to, Bug,” I said.

“I know,” she said sullenly, “you take care of both of us.”

She and I ate our breakfast quietly after that. I took her plate, gathered my supplies, and made a stop at her bed to say goodbye to her before I left.

“Sasha will be over soon. I’ll see you soon, okay, Bug?”

She tugged at my sleeve shyly and started to say something before she shook her head.

“I love you, Papa.”

“I love you, too, Bug. I’ll be back, I promise.”

She nodded, gave me a hug, and laid back down quietly. I tucked her in as she fell peacefully back to sleep. I took a deep breath and left for Central General.

There isn’t much worth reporting about the cracked and flora-covered roads between cities these days. The occasional roaming bandits on motorcycles exist here and there, but it was smooth getting to Central General on the backroads after pushing through a couple hours of

nighttime walking on the second day. I was tempted to push through the night to get inside, but I thought better of it and took the night to rest.

The following morning I got to work uncovering some sort of entrance. True to the rumors spread about it, all the windows were boarded up and the entrance was sealed with locks and chains. One entrance was even creatively welded shut. They really meant business with these precautions.

I managed to pry a couple boards from various windows only to spot the remains of long-lost patients next to the window. I'm not squeamish about dead bodies, but crawling over one to get inside seemed like a bad idea. After the third of these such windows I gave up and returned to the main entrance with the locks and chains. A pair of bolt cutters and a saw broke some of them, but I eventually had to resort to a blowtorch I lifted from a car repair shop a few years ago. I usually try to conserve my fuel, but this more than counted as a worthy cause. After a few hours of work I managed to get the door to budge.

As soon as I felt the door move, I prepared my protective equipment: a full hazmat suit I was able to gather from another scavenge into a hospital. I had had to patch the suit more than a few times, so I hoped it was still effective. Covered head to toe in a protective suit with backup goggles and respirator underneath, I shoved the door open and took my first look inside.

Just the entrance area looked like an over-budget horror movie. With a massive waiting room littered with rotting bodies, I could feel the stench of death even if I could not smell it through the airtight suit. I took a deep breath and thought of Anna before continuing past the forsaken flesh of fellow humans.

The scene did not get prettier as I moved through the hospital. The dead silence was chilling and unsettling as my footsteps reverberated down the hall filled with the corpses of

nurses, doctors, and patients. I kept my focus on Conner's list that I had memorized. I wove through each hallway, finding what I needed between various closets and operating rooms.

In one operating room, I spotted a body that seemed even more degraded, as if some explosive had gone off and ripped open their abdomen. What an unlucky bastard to be wounded by an explosion only to come to a hospital and be infected. I shrugged it off and kept on my search.

I checked off each item one by one until I had gathered each of the components off the list. I set them all beside the entrance I had come in, feeling thankful that I had found everything I needed. I was getting ready to leave when I heard a loud, wet pop.

I turned around and saw one of the bodies in the waiting room falling to the floor as some sort of spray radiated from it. I scanned the room and spotted several of the bodies bulging with boils from the abdomen that had not been there before. One exploded outward and spread even more fluid and particles into the air, followed by another and another. I felt and heard drops of something land on my suit.

I immediately scrambled together everything I needed from its pile by the door and ran outside, slamming the door behind me. I shuffled away as fast as I could in the suit. Removing each piece carefully, I dumped the suit in a dumpster and thoroughly cleaned all of my equipment, myself, and everything I had found in the hospital. I saved a sample of the liquid that landed on my suit for Conner or one of his goons to examine, but other than that I blocked all thoughts about what I had seen. I needed to get home and get Anna into surgery. I let my feet guide me home as my head was in a daze for the next two days.

It was several hours after nightfall when I got home, but I didn't care. All I wanted to see was Anna. Sasha was on the porch when I got there, and I questioned what she was doing there so late. Her eyes were swollen and red, but shock was written across her face.

"What the hell happened to you?" she asked, clearly flustered.

"What the hell happened to you?" I countered. "Is Anna okay?"

Sasha looked away.

"Sasha," I said, "What's going on with Anna?"

She sighed.

"Conners tried everything. It really did seem like she was holding on for you, Ronnie."

"No," I whispered.

I took a step towards our front door, but Sasha blocked me off and shook her head.

"She's gone, Ron," Sasha said. "We all knew this was coming."

"No," I said again. "No no no no."

Sasha placed a hand on my shoulder and began to cry.

"She loved you dearly, Ron. And she knew you loved her. That's what matters in the end."

"NO NO NO NO NO!" I screeched.

I shoved my way past Sasha and into the living room. Her bed was empty. I darted back out to Sasha.

"I need to see her!" I wailed. "Where is she?"

"It's been three days, Ron. You can see her at the service. We have everything planned, so just take it easy."

"Three days?" I felt lightheaded and like everything around me was a haze.

“Yes, Ron.”

“So if Connors would have done surgery the day I asked, she would have made it.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

I stormed off in the direction of Conner’s house.

“Where do you think you’re going at this hour of the night?” Sasha called out to me.

“To make things right,” I replied.

When I got to Connors’ house I battered his door in with a running start. I could feel my shoulder dislocate as I did, but I didn’t care. I heard him stumbling down the stairs and the cocking of a rifle.

“You killed my daughter, Dan,” I flatly announced. “If you had told me to get the anesthetic when you said to get the levothyroxine, I’d have gotten it to you in time. So I get to kill you or yours. That’s the deal.”

“I didn’t kill your daughter, and that was never our deal, Ron!” I heard him shout from upstairs.

“It’s the new deal I’m making,” I said, deliriously spinning around with my arms out. “I can’t kill Alpha for taking my wife, but I can take you down just easy.”

I heard the shot of the rifle and felt the impact in my arm, followed by a blistering hot sensation that quickly melted into my blind rage. I started laughing and felt like I was outside my body. I reached into my pocket and got out the levothyroxine that Connors had requested.

“Remember these, Dan? I’ve decided to add a special ingredient to it.”

“Put it down, Ron,” I heard him say shakily, “I’m sorry about everything that happened. I tried everything. I hate myself for not trying something sooner, but I did what was in her best

interest. So please don't take this out on my family. Kill me if you want, but leave the others alone."

I took out the sample of the fluid from the hospital. A wicked smile washed across my face.

"Don't see why I can't do both."

"Ron!"

I poured a drop of the sample into the levothyroxine and then flung the rest of it around the room. I felt giddy. I felt ashamed. I felt grief and pain, and I was filled with blood and heat.

"What did you just do, Ron?" Connors asked, horrified.

"Just a little present from Central General."

"Central General." He froze. "No, you didn't—"

"Let me know what turning into an incubator feels like. Bye, Dan."

I turned and walked out of the doctor's home, hearing the echo of another round behind me and a burning in my leg. Nothing mattered. I had gotten my vengeance. I wanted to see my daughter, but I didn't know where she was. There was no use for me anymore. I only existed to be in pain and cause more. So I stumbled out of town into the woods. I could feel the holes in my body increasingly as the adrenaline wore off, and I collapsed in the brush along the side of the road. As I lost consciousness I heard a motor approaching and then saw the shadow of a person stepping off of what looked like a motorcycle. They began to approach me and everything went blank.

When I came to, it was daylight. I opened my eyes to see I was laying on the floor of a gas station. A gruff man with a gray beard and flecks of brown looked over at me from a plastic chair he was leaning back in. He stood up and stepped over to me.

“Must’ve really pissed someone off to be made into swiss cheese like that,” he grumbled.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Just a stranger who knows combat first aid. And who are you, ya lucky bastard?”

“I don’t know about lucky. Bastard sounds about right.”

“Heh,” he chuckled, “at least you’re self-aware. Anyway, I’m out of here, but do you know anything about antibiotics?”

I blinked.

“Uh, yeah, a little.”

“Cool, then figure out how many of these things to take to not die. See ya.”

He tossed me a bottle of amoxicillin and slung a leather jacket over his right shoulder.

“Wait!” I called out. “What do I owe you?”

He turned around and tilted his head at me.

“Fuck all,” he said. “I’m not some kind of dealer. I just don’t want to see anyone else die when I could have prevented it. Long story.”

The man turned around and waved as he walked out the front door, got on his motorcycle, and drove away. I sat for a long moment in silence. Didn’t I deserve to die? Did I wish I had?

I looked at the bottle the stranger had given me and came to a resolution. I still don’t even know the amount of damage I’ve done. I’ve never returned to see whether I damned Conners, or perhaps the whole town, to the same fate as Central General. Whatever happened can never be undone. I will be haunted by my sins for the rest of my life. All I knew then was that I could just try not to do more. Eventually I will die in my own time anyway. Maybe I could be like the man who had saved me. It’s worth a try.