

THE RED RIVER VIRUS

He doesn't know how long it's been since he first squeezed his eyelids shut to double the darkness. He's been thinking about how the closing of eyes doesn't close anything, just redirects the gaze inwards towards tiny drawn curtains of flesh and that this is what he will be forced to stare at until his stubborn brain gives in and shuts down awareness, and in that same thought he realizes that maybe what he's actually fearing is oblivion itself, that this might be the final sleep of death, pulled under by the red river virus, and what excellent song lyrics those might be if he can survive and remember them. It doesn't help that just before bed he'd taken a look at the infection moving from elbow to bicep like mercury rising up a thermometer. It had marched right through his fading Motorhead tattoo, giving the gleaming skull and horns an angry glowing pink backdrop. He'd managed to get under the covers before Emily could glimpse it though, telling her only that he felt a little feverish. No way he's going to any hospital, because man are they gonna ask questions. Anyway, if it's really bad, he knows Emily will save him. She always has, always will...

Now he's finally forgotten himself and is time traveling, gradually sliding back into an innocent state of many years ago when he lived with a sustained panic swirling in his gut, and the future was merely a vague impossibility. He is teetering now, moving awkwardly. It's the shoes. They pinch and wobble. The soles are thick and blocky, and they elevate high off the pavement. He feels like an idiot. His biggest concern is now the horror of showing up at school and being the only one that fell for this, the only fool wearing this

clownish crap. He looks down and here in the dim morning light they appear endlessly sillier than they did in the store. They're about four-inch high platforms, brown leather with an exaggerated teardrop shape, shiny and bulbous at the toes. All he needs is a red foam nose and a balloon animal and he can join the circus. Maybe not a bad idea. He smiles inwardly. He thinks about end-of-summer shopping with his mother. "Don't you worry," she had said, "I'm sure everybody will be wearing these." There were no normal shoes anywhere. It had been useless to try to explain to her what this strange alien footwear represented to him, how it seemed to come from nowhere, this tidal wave of otherness, rising from that mysterious world far out beyond his tiny understanding, swallowing everything that used to seem reasonable. Normal comfortable shoes could no longer be found that year, or shirts or even notebooks or lunchboxes that weren't in blinding colors or covered in weird geometric patterns. It has something to do with the Beatles she had told him vaguely, because she didn't seem to understand it either. He remembers how he tried to satisfy curiosity by taking a few records out from the library in their thick clear plastic covers to play on his parents complicated phonograph system. One with the title "After Bathing at Baxter's" had baffled him. He'd been drawn by the cover art; a vivid cartoon of an old fashioned airplane, only to find the music was impenetrable, endless and tuneless. But with The Beatles "Let it Be" album there was something to grasp. He thought the songs were interesting and probably good except that something else was going on there, something that he couldn't detect in ordinary ways, like by listening. It held a secret, and he didn't know what it was, but he was convinced everyone else knew. Now here he is approaching the bus stop, and he has to go out into the world and pretend that he knows as well.

Emily wishes her husband would stop wriggling, pulling the covers his way, causing squeaky farting noises along the surface edges of his facemask as the car battery-sized machine hums on his nightstand. It's almost as bad as his snoring used to be, before she made him get the CPAP machine, but not worse than the sudden silent gap where he would stop breathing for long periods of time, and she'd hold her own breath waiting for him to gasp, then finally start up taking in air again. She wishes he wasn't always such a fool about going to the hospital. Any minute now she's going to wake him and feel his forehead to see if the fever is any worse, the same way her mother used to do for her, and she realizes once again that she's become mother to this man who's never gotten over the things that most people had dealt with long before they'd moved out of the family house. He's never accepted adulthood. That's the nicest way she can think of it. He's trying at least, and that's what keeps her still behind him, the bare minimum a wife should be. After all, she once learned to play bass just to be part of his world, and she stuck with him long after the band fell apart. He pulled her down into the muck of the working class bar existence and she let him, when there she was with a degree from Boston University and could have gone on to advanced chemistry or at least some sort of credible situation in a decent-paying lab. Instead she got into rock and roll and learned to drink cheap beer. She got tough and loud on the outside, and maybe even a little on the inside, because when you're playing to a crowd of brawlers in a dive bar somewhere in Brooklyn and a kid out there in the crowd gets shot and nobody realizes until the show is over because you were playing too loud for anyone to hear, all you can do is build a shell. And when you're blindsided by boredom and have nothing to look forward to besides a late night

dinner of Cheetos from a 7 Eleven and a cramped ride in a dark van stinking of pot and burrito farts you will by necessity harden yourself. The scientist in her recognizes it as an evolutionary thing, the development of a stronger exoskeleton for survival. Her mother sees it as her daughter met a jerk, went bad and tossed away her life. It wouldn't matter if she explained that she'd only just snorted the stuff, and that they both had been clean for ten years now, about the same amount of time they'd been away from the road, or that as a point of pride they were both stars to a large following of fans who still bought their recordings as well as the books of dark, biting apocalyptic poetry they wrote together, and that you could go on YouTube and see them kill on late night TV, on the Letterman show back in the early 90's, except that her mother had seen little accomplishment in any of this at the time and would never go near a computer now anyway. Emily sits up, reaches over to the night table on her side to grab a pack of cigs, lights one and exhales slowly. Whatever he's going through now, it has him sweating the bed over there. Maybe if she wakes him up he'll finally be ready to go to the hospital.

In his dream there's a small crowd gathered at the bus stop and a moist curtain of early morning fog. Sure enough everyone is wearing bright, garish colors, and suddenly its clear things have gone the opposite way: his red corduroy bellbottoms and brown leather platforms suddenly seem tame, almost timid. Rachel Sanger from down on Olm Circle has heels of a truly precarious height, the arches have vertical orange and green candy cane stripes down them, and she's wearing matching stockings. She's got eye shadow too; trying to seem older, in eight-grade this year so she's seen it all, probably not even a

virgin. Her face has a kind of nectarine-colored aura from the makeup. She might have liked him once, back last summer when they were in overalls at the brook, him lifting up rocks and the two of them reaching under for scurrying crayfish. Now with her hair up and blockade of friends to surround her she is one of Them. Everyone is wearing the new stuff, even those psychotic Carlson brothers from down on Edison. They've both got sandy hair and cracked reddish faces, like they're already old men. And they too are suffering those absurd platforms, as well as bellbottoms and shiny shirts, Dougie in silver polyester, and Trent in bright paisley, basic camouflage so they can fit right in like everybody else, as if they were normal. But he remembers how they took him by surprise out by the back fence, practically in his own yard, one of them holding him down, the younger one punching his face and stomach with unrestrained glee. The rest of the neighborhood it seemed descended and did nothing but watch, he even imagined he heard cheering. He had tried to tell his mom at breakfast this morning that they would all be there at the bus stop, that they all hated him. Dad overheard, coming up from the basement holding a fish tank, taking it to work, some sort of experiment with polymers, or enzymes or something. He was powerless to help, but he knew what he was supposed to say. Stand up to them. Don't let them push you around now, because once they see you as weak they'll never stop. These words ring in his head as he approaches cautiously, picking a spot in the shade of a hedge. The girls are talking guardedly, ignoring the boys. No one seems very comfortable about this situation, everyone forced to dress up just to go to school, like it was some kind of celebration instead of the prison sentence it really is. And he thinks: *at least we're in this together*. Most of the guys are now in a small circle and few of them look over and he can hear someone say his name; probably the

Carlson's relating the triumphant story of his defeat, how he didn't even fight back. He wishes he wasn't still afraid of them. But he is, and they know it. For his birthday last week he'd been given a knife, the elaborate, heavy Swiss Army kind. It's there in his pants pocket. He has it in his grip, and strokes the plastic casing with his thumb and feels the metal tip and the bump of the tiny bolt on the side with his index finger. If he shows Dougie his knife, opens the blade, lets him know he means business here in front of all these people that had laughed at him, no one will see him as weak. He will be a hero and he won't have to worry ever again what people think about him. He continues to caress the back edge of the blade for security as he stumbles toward the group of boys. As he walks he focuses his eyes on a spot of driveway just ahead of him. Could he do this? He's vaguely aware that he's been here before. It happens almost without him thinking about it, without any control. The knife comes out of his pocket. He doesn't look down at it; just flips open the blade as he continues to walk. "Hey Dougie," he says, and then looks up. The kid turns around and his face freezes. This is serious, and he knows it. "I've got something for you."

This is how it happens. He remembers now. The reason that he's here, to reenact this scene that changed his life, that made him what he is, that caused him to be sent to the school for juvenile offenders, that led him to burn down the entire town square, that made him want the feel of drugs in his veins and unleashed a powerful side of him thrill-seekers would one day pay to see. Maybe this time he can change it. He looks down at the gleaming knife, and that's when he notices that Dougie has a knife as well. It's too late to turn back. If he doesn't stab his opponent right now, he will himself be stabbed

and that will be the end. This is the way it always unfolds. There's never any turning back. He grasps the knife holding it with his hand hanging down loosely ready to slice it upwards with all the force he can muster. Just as he is about to attack his arm is grabbed from behind. "Oh my god," the person says. It's a woman's voice. And then: "I'm putting a stop to this right now."

Emily is holding his arm, examining it; looking carefully at the skin. The lights are on. "Wh – what are you doing?" he says into the mask. She doesn't answer, she's absorbed in what she's seeing. Then she says: "I think you've got something to tell me, don't you? This infection is from a needle." There's anger simmering in her voice. Hurt. Sadness. He pulls the oxygen mask off with his other hand, hits the kill switch on the machine. "You know, in my dream you just saved my ass," he says. She looks at him. She's so pissed now. "I guess that's what I do, isn't it?"

He closes his eyes and bites his lip. He's just starting to realize how much pain he's in.

"I fucked up Em. And I didn't want to tell you."

"Was it worth it?"

"You mean what I did?"

"I mean not telling me. Pretending like you were clean, like you had it all together. Lying to me, and all along you're really fucking doing it. Dammit! You stupid idiot! Maybe I should just let you get what you deserve. Yeah, we'll just sit here and wait for the infection to hit your bloodstream, and then travel to your heart."

"It hurts baby...it really hurts."

"Yeah," she says, and sighs. "I know how it feels."

He's silent for a minute and then musters up his sweetest tone: "You know I really love you, Em."

"Well, isn't that good for you," she says, icily.

A few minutes later she's up out of bed and getting dressed.

"Let's go junkie," she says. "Let's get you to the hospital."