

Plague

As usual we got it wrong. The apocalyptic like threat to humanity didn't come from global warming, disgruntled robots with artificial intelligence, or hordes of the undead clamoring for our brains. We stood at the pinnacle of the evolutionary ladder for so long that while the cynics in us could envision the end of our kind, our narcissistic nature could only imagine the death blow for such a dominate race would happen solely at its own hand. The truth, however, is vastly more humbling than that.

History has a way of repeating itself. In the 14th century the black plague swept through Europe, killing one third of the population. Later, it was theorized that the plague was caused by the fleas on black rats that carried and spread the disease. Before the governments and media died along with the people that made them up, a similar scenario was hypothesized as the cause of the pandemic. Some kind of virus was passed from flea to rat, but instead of turning the rodent into an unwitting host, the virus flipped a switch in the rat's brain that changed their feeding and social behavior. They no longer scurried in dumpsters and gutters under cover of night. They poured from the shadows in even greater numbers than we could have imagined and in a matter of days devoured hundreds of thousands. In one horrifying instant our false sense of security was shattered and our civilization crumbled under the teeth of billions of gnawing rodents.

Wherever there are people, there are rats. There were some initial attempts to eradicate the creatures. Exterminators, scientists, and the military all tried their hand at fumigating, burning, and poisoning the things, but they ended up killing as many people as rats and it made no significant difference in the rodent population. It wasn't long before the supernaturally clever creatures learned to

avoid even touching the arsenic laced food people liberally surrounded their homes with. Most began sleeping curled up as tight as they could get in the center of a circle of elaborate rat traps and sticky paper. The rats stepped daintily over the ineffectual bait with the up most confidence. Turning up their noses at everything but the soft meat of the creatures who once thought they ruled the earth.

I've seen dozens of attacks first hand. I've seen a person swarmed and killed in a matter of seconds, buried under a furry wave of ravenous teeth. And, then there were the survivors; men and women with missing fingers and ears, and the children, dragging their legless bodies across the hard ground, faces scarred by what they've had to endure. Still, I wonder if they aren't the lucky ones. I can hardly recall the sound of my own name. In this new world I'm only referred to as Rat girl, Rat freak, or my personal favorite, Rat bitch.

Not all humans are attacked by rats, a very small percentage could walk right into a nest of them and not receive so much as a nibble. It's as if we're invisible. The other survivors saw us however, dubbed us rat people, and blamed us for bringing about the plague. As if we are a race of reverse pipers; calling forth rabid beasties and bringing them into the camps of survivors. And so we were cast out, hated, and hunted by our former neighbors.

I say we because humans are a social creature by nature, and although I haven't seen another rat person in over a year I like to think we are a community bonded by our rejected status from humans and rats alike. But really there is no we, there is only I.

Usually, I sleep in a tree, which is as comfortable as it sounds, but you'd be surprised at how few people ever bother to look up. It's a good system, or at least it was. Winter is coming on fast, most of the leaves have fallen from the trees, stripping me of their cover, but it doesn't much matter since it is getting dangerously cold anyway. I find myself dreaming more and more of the Southern California sun; I can sometimes still feel it soaking into my skin just before I wake

up shivering. In the days after the outbreak I fled the infested city of Los Angeles, thinking that my only chance at survival would be to head to an isolated place. Now, I know that my best recourse is to return.

The one upside to the coming winter is that the days are considerably shorter. And, as soon as the pale sun passes out behind the mountains I break from my cover and head south. I doubt I'll be able to make it back to my home city, but any major city will do.

I've become quite adept at traveling in darkness. Old habits die hard: as changed as the rats are they still are more active at night, and people have therefore reverted to viewing the night with a kind of wary Dread. It works out for me at any rate; if I'm spotted I'll probably still be shot at, but I'm much less likely to be hit or pursued.

My preference is to give any camps along the way as wide a berth as possible, but there is a charged expectancy in the atmosphere that I've learned to interpret as a sign of an incoming storm. The ground is still muddy from the last storm that passed through and I don't think I can survive another night of tramping through unfamiliar hillsides in the middle of a downpour.

So, when a survivor's camp comes into view I decide to skirt around its borders instead of detouring through the hilly forest that surrounds it. If I die at least I'll do it relatively dry and rested. They've got a big bon fire going. I'm close enough to hear, but not feel it roar. I try not to curse the people that must be sitting around it, warm and surrounded by familiar faces. The notes of a guitar float in the air and stop me dead. It draws me in and I creep in closer, against my better judgment.

There's a man and a woman sitting by the fire. He is the one playing, he's not all that great, but when the woman starts singing along with the music it moves something within me.

I'm not even aware of taking a step towards them until a twig snaps under my foot, and the music abruptly stops.

When the outbreak first began it was easy to pass myself off as a normal survivor. As time went on and attacks became more and more inevitable it was impossible to explain away my unscarred face and full set of fingers and toes. Most damningly now however, is the fact that I carry no fire, which seems to be the only thing the rats fear.

"Who's there?" the man shouts, starting to rise. I begin to back away slowly, hoping the shadows will swallow me back up before they see me.

"It's a rat freak," the woman shrieks as she clutches the man's arm, "Kill it Jimmy! Jimmy, kill it!" With my cover now blown I turn and run before, Jimmy has a chance to obey the woman's orders. The night comes alive with the sounds of semi coherent promises of violence hurled at my back as I flee for my life.

My feet suddenly hit gravel, and I nearly pitch head long when I trip on what I assume is a cracked curb. I catch myself from falling face first onto the broken pavement. But, just as quickly I leap backwards, almost losing my hard won balance when a white shape shoots from the darkness to stand before me. It is an albino rat, complete with red eyes. The shouts of the approaching people don't seem to affect it in the least. Calmly, it regards me, sitting on its plump haunches and tilting its head as if trying to place me.

It starts off again but pauses to look back at me. Lacking any better ideas I head after it. I'm afraid I'll lose sight of it as I stumble around the unfamiliar streets, but it seems to understand my predicament, waiting patiently when I fall behind, and even squeaking once when I turn in the wrong direction. It stops atop a manhole cover and looks up expectantly at

me. No one, no matter how blood thirsty, would follow me into the sewers seeing as they were flooded with rats even before the outbreak. On the other hand there's been no one to maintain them since then either and I wonder if it might not be better to just let the survivors tear me limb from limb.

The albino rat chatters at me impatiently as the sounds of my pursuers intensifies. I drag off the cover as silently as possible and climb down before I can think better of it. The smell is obscene, and as I step down into the swirling shin high water I nearly swoon at the fumes that rise from the disturbed sludge. I force myself to move forward, keeping my back against the wall and trying not to think about the things winding around my legs.

The survivors reach the manhole and shine a light down. I'm pretty sure I'm too far for them to see me, but I press myself flat against the wall and hold my breath just in case. They toss down a few insults and rocks before retreating. Some of the tension leaves my body, until I hear the manhole cover being eased back into place and the sound of an approaching engine. I feel the panic setting in as I realize what they're planning to do. The car is rolled on top of the cover, and the engine is cut. I hear them walking away, whooping with delight at their clever bit of deadly poetic justice. They've trapped me down here, trapped me like a rat, I think as a bubble of hysterical laughter tries to burst out of me.

I take out my penlight and look around. The sewers are an impossible maze of tunnels and churning water filled with undefinable debris. Then I look up and find the rat peering down at me with those intelligent eyes. It makes me think of a movie I once saw as a little girl before the plague, when I still had a name, about a white mouse who was adopted by a human family.

The hysteria is still near the surface and I let out a sharp laugh as I say, "Well, Stuart, may I call you, Stuart?" The name suits him, and he seems to perk up at my words, "I don't suppose

you'd be willing to show me another way out of here?" To my utter surprise, Stuart starts down a tunnel and as before stops to look back at me. This time I don't hesitate; I follow, Stuart through the winding tunnels for what seems like hours. He finally stops in front of a rusted ladder. I climb it and shove my way above ground.

The night air is freezing, but I suck in lung full after burning lung full. It has started to rain and I know I should get up, but I continue to kneel on the floor alternating between fits of crying and laughter. Stuart watches my antics with weary disapproval, but he doesn't leave my side. Shakily I get to my feet, Stuart is on the move immediately and I hustle to keep up. He stops, and I launch into another bout of tearful mirth when I see that the beautiful creature Has led me to an abandoned supermarket.

I peel off my putrid clothes, leaving them in a dripping pile, and pull on clean jeans, thick socks, and a hoodie that is only slightly too large. All of the jackets are gone, but I do find a sleeping bag, and a sturdy backpack. I stuff the pack full of food and water, as well as a change of clothes. I've become an accomplished scavenger since the outbreak. The most important rule in my view is: you grab what you can when you can. Clothes and fresh water are more precious than gold and I scoop them up with all the wild glee of a forty-niner hitting pay dirt. With my new acquisitions in order I regard, Stuart.

"WE got it wrong," I tell him as I toss half of my beef jerky in his direction, "diamonds aren't a girl's best friend; you are." He doesn't argue and we eat in comfort. I unroll my sleeping bag and for once fall into a deep instant sleep. The next evening I pack up and head out, Stuart falling easily into step beside me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

By the third day, Stuart lets me put him in the backpack. I talk constantly, pouring out everything I've held in since the outbreak. Stuart pokes his head out of the pack and rests it on my shoulder

occasionally. The irony of our fledgling alliance isn't lost on me. The survivors are convinced that people like me somehow triggered the plague, controlling the rat's behavior, and once every rat person is killed they believe things will return to the way they once were. I wonder what they'd say if they could see, Stuart and I now. And, I wonder what it says about me that I was so easily charmed into adopting one of the creatures that destroyed my civilization and made me an outcast. I have no answers so I focus on the road ahead, and leave my tangled thoughts for later.

We come across more and more rusted cars and neglected houses. Many of them still have their former occupants inside, half liquefied and chewed. Just as many however, lie abandon. Stuart and I stop to investigate, or take shelter within them whenever the mood strikes us. I consider trying to use one of the cars, but quickly dismiss the idea; it would bring too much unwanted attention. A bicycle might work, if I can find one, but for now I'm content just walking with, Stuart.

We haven't seen any sign of survivors in days. The sun, wane as it is, proves too great a temptation, and I decide to risk traveling during the day. It feels glorious to turn my face up to the sky and let it wrap me up in all the warmth it has to offer. All too soon however, the wind springs up, bringing with it depressingly dark clouds that smother the last of the light.

"Looks like another big storm," I inform, Stuart. His only response is to burrow deeper into the backpack. When the rain finally begins to fall the wind picks it up and hurls it like darts in every direction. I unzip my sleeping bag, pulling it over my head and around my shoulders like a hooded cape. Even so, the rain finds its way through, and the sound of approaching thunder lets me know it's only going to get worse.

"Time to make camp," I say and look around for a place to hunker down. There is what might have once been a small shopping strip just ahead. All of the stores seem to have been looted. The

windows have been shattered, the glass mixing with the trampled garbage the looters dropped or left behind. There's a tractor trailer smashed into the front of the liquor store on the far side of the street

"Slim pickings," I sigh as we come up to the first sagging store front. As with all the others the windows are broken in, but the sign on the door still reads, "Paul's Party Palace: where your fun is our business," in bright confetti colors. It's as good a place as any I decide and climb through the window, careful not to step on any glass. I stop just inside, trying to sense if anything else is taking shelter here. Stuart jumps out of the pack and heads down one of the isles. I take this as a positive sign and follow.

Most everything has been ripped off the shelves. Colorful wigs, masks, deflated balloons, and cans of silly string clutter the floor. I make a quick circuit around the shop, spotting a bag of assorted candies and snatching it up before continuing around towards the cash register. As I inspect the desk and the displays around it, hoping to find more junk food, a shriek splits the air and nearly stops my heart. I whirl to face whoever made the sound only to find a grinning skeleton with a plastic ax sticking out of its skull. Feeling like an idiot I continue my search and avoid the screaming skeleton. There's nothing else of use, but there is an open manager's office in the back that, Stuart and I use as our sleeping quarters.

I come awake with a start; something is wrong. I'm up in an instant gathering my sleeping bag and shrugging into my pack; when you're a rat person you learn the value of being prepared to escape in a moment's notice. Still, nothing seems out of place.

Then I hear something, the sound that must have awakened me, the sound of motors. Crouching down I ease towards one of the front windows making sure to avoid the grinning skeleton. Peering over the window ledge I see three motorcycles tearing down the street. Happily they are headed away from us. The riders are huge wild haired men that might have stepped straight out of one

ice age or another. The man in the lead seems to have decorated his upper body as well as his bike with an assortment of bones. It's hard to be sure at this distance but some look suspiciously human.

"Time to go," I announce and, Stuart leaps obediently into the backpack. I wish the skeleton luck as I climb back out onto the street. I start off in the opposite direction from the Neanderthal bikers. A moan of absolute agony floats out from one of the buildings, freezing me instantly. I almost expect to see that damn grinning skeleton lumbering out of the party supply store to follow me. But, the street is deserted and the moan was anything but artificial. Stuart begins chattering in my ear, a sure sign that he wants to move on. Usually I trust, Stuarts instincts, but there is someone sobbing pitifully somewhere close and I hush, Stuart so I can pin point the source.

The crying is issuing from the liquor store. I approach the ruined entrance and peek warily over the side of the tractor's rusted hood. Even with the coming darkness I can see that the interior has been trashed. Bottles of every variety lie smashed all over, and the walls are smeared liberally with what I'm certain is fecal matter. I can smell it even over the nauseating mixture of spilled spirits on the ground.

Nothing good can come of going in there, but before I can back away the moaning comes again. A form moves in the back corner of the store, crying out as it does. I squeeze past the trailer and step inside the building, feeling like the stupidest bimbo in a bad slasher film. My boots stick to the filthy floor, and although I move slowly it is impossible to move silently in this mess.

I jump as I realize that this establishment also boasts a hanging skeleton, of course this one doesn't scream as I approach. It's beyond screaming now. He, at least I assume it's a he, is still wearing a pair of tattered pants although only one leg pokes out of them. The other leg is missing from the knee down, and I suddenly remember the biker with the bone accessories.

There's a shopping cart half filled with unbroken liquor bottles by the skeleton's side. I heft a bottle of tequila trying to gauge how effective it might be as a weapon. I decide it has to be better than my bare hands and I hold it by the neck, ready to swing it like a club, as I inch towards the figure in the corner.

Turning my back on the skeleton doesn't bother me all that much, it's dead. Only the survivors can make my palms slick with terror, and, yet I can't walk away, can't ignore the sound of a suffering person, because no matter what anyone might think, I am still human.

The woman lying in a ragged heap in the corner doesn't seem much better off than the swinging corpse. Every visible inch of skin is a patchwork of bruises in a variety of startling shades. She is practically a skeleton herself, and as I watch the feeble flailing of her emaciated limbs I know that there's nothing I can do to save her.

The woman's eyes are closed, perhaps swollen shut, not that I fear her recognizing me. She'd only gotten a fleeting glimpse of me in the dark the night we first met. I have no trouble placing her however, even now in her debilitated state. I remember her sitting by the glow of a bon fire, I remember her voice that drew me in, and I remember her shouts that called for my annihilation. I wonder if the dangling dead man is, Jimmy. I crouch down beside her, moving slowly so as not to startle her.

"Can you hear me?"

"Co-cold," she stammers through chattering teeth. She does open her eyes a fraction, although it seems to be only by extreme effort. I unzip my sleeping roll and lay it over her like a blanket. I pull out a water bottle from my bag and hold it to her cracked lips.

"Try to drink some of this," I encourage as I gently lift her head. Most of it spills down her chin, but she does manage to get some of it down.

“Good,” I say, wiping her chin with a corner of the sleeping bag.

“Who are you?” she asks. It takes me a moment to remember, but I finally tell her,

“My name is, Adriana.”

“Thank you, Adriana” she says. I want to tell her that hearing my name is the greatest thanks anyone could give me, but just then, Stuart pops his head out of my backpack and she screams.

“You’re one of them,” she shrieks in a voice that is surprisingly fierce in intensity. I try to explain that I am just a survivor like herself, but this only causes her shrieking to grow in volume and desperation. Her outrage must have lent her strength, because suddenly she sits up and faster than I could have thought possible. Her hand shoots towards my face, fingers hooked into claws. I throw my own hand up to protect myself and scream as her ragged fingernails sheer my skin from my palm to halfway down my wrist.

I stumble backwards watching dumbly as my blood drips onto the filthy floor. The woman is still keening, wordlessly now, like some kind of maddened animal. Stuart leaps out of nowhere to clamp onto the hand that is reaching for me again. Her yells turn to howls of pain and terror as she tries fruitlessly to shake, Stuart off. Suddenly rats of every size and hue emerge from every direction, and converge on the woman. I turn and run, too horrified to even glance back, but the dying groans of the woman chase me like a final accusation.

I run through the gathering darkness, hardly noticing when I fall. Stumbling to my feet I keep moving, ignoring the pain blooming in my chest, until I reach a highway off ramp where my legs finally buckle beneath me. The full contents of my stomach go sailing over the side of a guardrail in a hot stream of misery. Even then I continue to retch and sob, as if despair could be so easily purged.

It hits me that I am alone again and I consider throwing myself over the guard rail and into the ditch below. Instead, I open the bottle of tequila which is the only thing I managed to hold onto, and after taking a swig I pour the rest onto my scratched hand and wrap it with torn strips from my shirt. Neither experience is pleasant, and I hurl the bottle over the rail where it breaks with a satisfying sound.

Only now does my body start to register how cold it's gotten. Standing is a struggle, my legs wobble alarmingly and I have to clutch the door handle of a nearby pickup truck to keep from sprawling on the pavement. Peering into the window I see the driver face down on the steering wheel; he almost appears to be sleeping except for the fact that his entrails are spilled over his lap. I recoil, my stomach does a little flip, but there's nothing left to throw up. The highway is clogged with vehicles; most likely however, they contain passengers like this one, as it is I barely have the strength to climb into the truck bed. There's a bald tire, battered toolbox, and dusty tarp on the flatbed. I wrap myself in the tarp and try not to think about my sleeping bag.

Looking up at the heavens I'm struck at how dazzlingly bright it seems. Without the lights and smog of the cities the stars parade across the sky and captivate me the way they must have done my ancestors. I look out at the sea of vehicles, and wonder how many of them have become caskets for the dead. Death has come and blown down all the glittering construction's that man erected to keep them safe. And, the survivors are hopelessly diluted to think that anything can bring back what has been lost.

For the first time I wonder if maybe they got it wrong. Perhaps, humanity has not been doomed but given a do over. I flex my stinging hand and think about all the survivors that yearn for my blood. But, what if rat people are not the cursed but the chosen ones? In that case, maybe I was meant to do much more than simply survive.

Stuart lands in the truck bed with an audible plop. He gives me an uncertain look. I hesitate for just an instant before extending my injured hand to him. He rushes forward, rubbing himself against it

like a cat. I glance at the sky again, it's lighter now; most of the stars have disappeared, out shined by the coming sun.

“Time to get started,” I tell, Stuart. My legs are steady as I move down the road. I pause to watch the sun turn the heavens into a kaleidoscope before finally bursting through and illuminating everything it touches. Stuart sits on my foot and looks up at me with the same kind of rapture. Smiling, I continue on, moving past wreckage after wreckage knowing that my days of traveling in darkness are behind me. Stuart and I have finally stepped from the shadows and inherited the earth.