

The Cost of Perfection

Written: January 22nd, 2013

Citizens of Newmerica would do anything for the ideal body, including mass murder. There was a time, when the government was prevalent, that a person wouldn't conceive actions that have become common as of late. The common belief is that a single person can be quite intelligent but the mob is a different kind of beast. The mob is inhumane. History can attest to the fact that a single catalyst can coerce large groups to the pinnacle of chaos.

From the Nika riots in Constantinople to Bloody Monday of Louisville Kentucky or even the Los Angeles riots of 1992 and Kansas City massacre of 2057; large groups don't have the sound thinking of an individual. As a former vegetarian kneeling over a carcass and tearing into flesh with rigorous intentions, I think back on what has become of my country. I can remember how it all started.

The silver globe sparkled with flashing green light as it descended the spire. The iridescent liquid luminescent apparatus, or ILLA as it's known in shorthand, caused the sphere to constantly change colors during the ten-second downfall. The light source allowed it to project holographic images and, in this case, a countdown as the ball dropped. Once it reached zero, explosions erupted overhead and the ILLA projected 2094 while the large crowd in the center of Times Square sang out with cheer. "Happy New Year," I heard from behind me. Turning around, I was met with a sight that left me speechless.

"Robert? Oh my god!" I flung my arms around him as he hoisted me up, leaving the tips of my boots barely scraping the pavement. Holding me, our lips met and, for that moment, my world was contained within his touch. Slowly, he lowered me back to my feet and pulled back revealing his handsome smile. "You said you had to work late and wouldn't make it. What happened?"

"I decided that time with you was more important." He ran his fingers across my forehead catching a loose strand of my auburn hair and guided it behind my ear. "I can deal with the new product launch tomorrow. One more day isn't going to hurt the sales projections. Here is where I want to be." His words made me melt as I leaned into him and caught his musky scent. Burrowing lightly under his chin, I felt at home. I was incredibly content in his arms and so happy that he came. Ringing in the New Year together was a tradition we'd been holding for the past four years.

Manhattan was the last remaining part of the former United States and they still held the ball drop every year. It was a call back to what the world had been before the civil riots, and the war that led to the united being divided. I was born just after the ashes had fallen on the ceasefire. Manhattan was the closest my generation could come to what had once been. I always imagined it seemed more magnificent through the looking glass because if it was that great, how could they have let it fall apart?

Even so, the landmark was always party central over the holiday. The island resort accommodations were abundant, but lodging sold out quickly. Purchasing a ticket to the festivities wasn't cheap, but the two of us always managed. Robert worked as the head of development for the pharmaceuticals firm Gen Corp., and I was a journalist for Newmerica Today. We were both earning a good living and were able to splurge at times.

"I'm glad you made it honey." Pulling back, I gave him a smile. "Now that it's 2094, you want to really ring in the New Year with a bang?"

"And what do you have in mind?" he asked with a devilish grin.

"I want what every woman wants when her man has just made a romantic gesture in the middle of Times Square." Leaning in, I whispered into his ear "I want to take you back to the hotel, tear off your clothes, get under the covers and-", I paused for effect before continuing, "-order room service." Robert started laughing loudly. "What's so funny?" I asked coyly. "Was your mind in the gutter? Listen mister, I'm a lady."

“Oh really now?” he said as I stood with my fists on my hips, nodding my head with conviction. Grabbing me, he lifted me up once more as he continued, “We’ll just have to see what I can do about those lady-like sensibilities.”

I tilted my head back laughing as my feet dangled with our arms wrapped around one another. Looking into his eyes, still giggling, I said “oh trust me mister, you’ve earned tons of brownie points tonight. You’re definitely going to score.” We kissed before walking to hail a cab with our fingers intertwined.

That was the beginning of the end as I recall it. Everything changed from that point onwards. I lick the juices from my fingertips as I reflect on those days. Sitting over the slab, my teeth dig into the raw meat spewing its warm decadent flavor across my lips and dripping down my chin. I want to stop eating but the yearning for the robust flavor is too strong to ignore. I tear piece after piece away, gnawing all the way to the bone without wanting to leave the slightest piece behind. I wasn’t always this way though, eating everything in sight. It wasn’t until the launch of the newest and best thing to come out of Gen Corp. since the cure for HIV back in 2073. It was called Dissolve, and no matter how much I hated it, my hands played a part in what happened.

The producer began counting down the crew while I looked into the camera lens. Just as he reached zero, I began another live interview. “In the two months since Dissolve was released to the market with FDA approval, it has flown off the shelves leaving most distributors with a long waiting list. The miracle drug that has been trending online since its debut has the world in a buying frenzy.” I turned to face camera two and continued, “And now we have the head of development from Gen Corp. to tell us more about it.”

Robert smiled at me making me almost melt on camera as he went into his monologue. “Well after a century of obesity problems in our country, and the world, Gen Corp. has come up with the solution. After pain-staking research with many trials and error, we’ve found how to dissolve away fat cells with the magic of this little pill.” He held up a green shell casing that had a smoky liquid contained within. “This is Dissolve, and it can solve all your overweight problems. This pill is guaranteed to continuously dissolve away the pounds and send the waste through your urine. If you aren’t satisfied while taking it, we’ll send you a six month supply for free as well as reimburse what you’ve already purchased.”

“That’s quite the guarantee,” I said.

“We believe in our product and know it works. We’re currently accepting backorders due to the large demand. Production at Gen Corp. has ramped up to meet the sales numbers for everyone that wishes to purchase this little miracle.”

Turning to face camera one I stated, “You too can get your hands on Dissolve by going to your local drugstore. Upon purchase, you’ll receive this plastic card that keeps track of your number in line. The display screen continuously updates until you’re first in line. Once that happens, you’ll be notified when your order arrives. Now back to sports.”

“And we’re out,” the cameraman said.

I placed a quick kiss on Robert’s cheek before he had to leave for other interviews. “Thanks for letting me go first sweetie.”

“Anytime sugar, I’ll see you tonight.” After a quick smile, he left and I went back to work.

After that interview and the ones that followed, the entire world jumped at this easy way of life. Instead of working to burn calories, Newmerica’s own Gen Corp. had come up with the answer. Having the largest percentage of obesity on the planet, Newmerica was the battlefield that created the pill to cheat the healthy lifestyle. It seemed simple enough, and that was the best part. Why avoid all the

delicious sugary and fatty foods, while killing yourself on a treadmill, when you could do whatever you wanted? Just popping this little pill each morning kept the pounds away for you. Who wouldn't take the easy way out? That philosophy is exactly why it got so much worse.

"Will you just stop fucking asking questions?!? I have to figure out where it all went wrong. I need to fix this."

"Robert calm down. It can't really be that bad can it?" I asked standing in his office.

Spinning around in his chair to face me, he slid forward and took my hands. "I'm sorry baby but you don't understand. The compound transitions in the bloodstream over time. The Dissolve formula alters itself with prolonged use. It attaches to the brainstem and ramps into overdrive. We've been able to keep it out of the media so far, but that will only last so long. Our sales figures calculate that roughly 93% of the world population took the drug over the past nine months, which means it will affect everyone."

"Ramp into overdrive? Sweetie what are you talking about?"

Robert dropped his head into his lap with a heavy sigh while running his fingers through the back of his hair. The heavy weight that he was about to hoist onto my shoulders was troubling him more than I'd ever seen. I always knew him as a light-hearted man, but today I was seeing a side I'd yet to be introduced to. "I swear I never meant for any of this to happen," he said. I knelt on the floor coming face-to-face with him. His eyes rose to meet mine and I could see tears in his eyes. "The formula never shuts down. It eats fat at such a rapid pace that the subject is forced to eat constantly. It's the only way they'll be able to keep their body from reducing to nothing from the lack of nourishment."

"You mean it's going to kill everybody?"

With another heavy sigh, he looked deep into my eyes with tear-streaked cheeks and said, "Not exactly."

He wasn't kidding. There is an odd twist to the side effects of Dissolve. It would almost be comical if not the carnage. Still hungry, I drop the bone onto the concrete and reach for a thigh. Lifting it up, I'm about to take a bite when I see a small group slowly walking towards me. The street is deserted except for some abandoned cars, but now there is movement amongst them. This slow brushing of soles on the pavement meant only one thing, they are slowly approaching.

The binge drones are wasted away to mindless automatons of skin and bones, propelled by hunger. What's left of their skin is rotting away from malnourishment. This is what we've become; drudging nomads in search of food. Go without it long enough and you no longer appear human. You become one of the drones. Those that still appeared normal had taken to calling them "bingers". Once you saw them eat, you completely understood why.

The bad part is that we're all bingers to a degree. When we are lucky enough to find food, it becomes a double edged sword. The insatiable hunger drives us to eat anything and everything we can get our hands on. But for those fortunate enough to find a meal, it also keeps our flesh healthy. This becomes too tempting a target for others to ignore. That is how it all escalated.

The streets filled with smoke as the police in riot gear advanced on a crowd of people smashing store fronts and setting cars on fire. The senseless rioting had returned, the destructive organism known to appear many times through history. I watched from the windows of Robert's office, high above those screaming for justice. Even though I understood the rationale for being angry, the hatred of the group still appeared psychotic. The masses had grown into the mob.

"Only thirty-six years into Newmerica and we're resorted to this."

"What?" Robert asked as he rummaged through papers on his desk.

I turned to face him and leaned my back against the glass. "I just meant that it seems that no matter what happens, we can't escape our nature. The rebellion in 2058 caused the States to become six countries, and now look at us. It was trumpeted as the end of the madness in the west. Millions died in the fighting, but it seems we're right back on that path."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Robert asked, stepping over to a wall-safe to begin emptying the contents into a backpack.

"Never mind, just ignore me." It was at this time, I finally noticed Robert packing. "What are you doing?"

Zippering up the sack, he grabbed my hand. "We have to get out of the city. It's about to get so much worse. They're all going to get very, very hungry."

I stared at him with a look of bewilderment and pure confusion. "I thought you said we had months before that happened? You've only been working for a couple weeks. How can you give up now? You haven't finished the cure yet!"

With urgency in his voice, he looked into my eyes as he said, "My calculations were wrong, it's happening now. Reports have already flooded in that the local markets have been emptied by looting. The hunger is getting worse, and people will begin turning on each other any day now."

"How can you just give up then?" I screamed. "We took Dissolve too Robert. If it's going to happen to all of them, it's going to happen to us too. We'll starve."

"No, I've been stockpiling food for us while I was working. We're set for at least a year at my father's old cabin. We'll be safe and secluded there while I continue looking for a cure." Grabbing my hand again he pleaded with me. "You have to come with me, now."

I close the door behind me to avoid the migrating horde. My meal lies on the floor beside me while I check the window. I have to make sure none of them saw me. As they begin to pass by, none of them look my direction. Judging from their appearance, they haven't had a meal in months. A few have even turned to self mutilation for sustenance; one is missing his lips, exposing the mandible. It's amazing what someone can do to themselves if they're desperate. Whenever you caught sight of the bingers, and were lucky enough to live through it, you saw the devastation of their bodies. It was enough to make you sick. I had cried myself to sleep on more than one occasion at the thought of becoming one of them.

I drop back to my knees, digging my teeth into the meat. I rip away a bloody chunk to gorge myself on. It's funny how the best laid plan can turn on itself, leading you down a path you never saw coming. For years, I enjoyed making every meal meat free because I always saw myself as an avid animal. While I wasn't a psycho looking down on those that chose to eat animals, I forbade it on my plate. Now though, meat is all I crave. I laugh as I chew my food at the way things change so suddenly. It reminds me how Robert's plan had the same problem.

Three weeks after we abandoned the city we found ourselves going back. Robert and I made it to his father's cabin, but it took a few days to get there. Normally it was a five hour drive but, with all the empty vehicles on the road, it was impossible to get up to highway speeds. We were constantly passing cars that had been wrecked, bashed in, or set ablaze. That wasn't to mention all the times we pulled off the road, hidden by trees, to sleep or avoid people passing by.

Part of me thought Robert was being too paranoid with all the precautions he took, but I could also sense the changes going on around me. I found myself eating six or seven meals a day by the time we reached the cabin. I couldn't believe the change in my metabolism. I had led a healthy lifestyle because I feared becoming fat, just like everyone else. The media, the media I played a part in, didn't help the matter. Even though I had no need of Dissolve, I took it anyway. I needed to make sure I didn't gain weight. I had to look perfect, have the ideal body.

If I hadn't been so focused on my appearance, I might not be in this boat. Robert did his best to keep my mind off of it, but it was difficult to do. I was constantly reminded each time my stomach started aching. Knowing that there would be food at the cabin helped me cope, but we learned that it wouldn't last as long as expected.

At the cabin, we found a family of squatters that had already started into Robert's nest egg. Bursting in the door with gun drawn, we found Robert's assistant, along with his wife and two children, eating in the kitchen. "What the hell Jimmy? I had all this brought out here so I could work on finding a cure!"

"Mr. Clevens?" he said in shock. Stuttering, he searched for the words to make it past the can of ravioli he'd been eating. "I'm sorry sir but, you see, my family was starving." His twin girls looked up to us from their bowls with glassy eyes. "All the markets had already been emptied and, since you had me deliver it, I knew all this food was just sitting up here."

"Damn it Jimmy, this was supposed to last two people a year." Robert paced beside them and placed the pistol on the counter. I didn't even know he had one until his brash entry and the twins must not have noticed either. The girls immediately jumped from their stools and crowded around Jimmy, causing Robert to glance at the gun. Waiving a hand in dismissal he said, "I'm not going to hurt you. I had this on me when I saw the car outside. I didn't know who was in here."

The family didn't seem to relax until Robert released the clip and emptied the chamber as a gesture of good faith. Looking at the girls, he held his palms out towards the plates saying "Please keep eating." Even in such a dire situation, my love couldn't stop trying to help people. As the twins slowly returned to their seats beside their mother, Robert pulled Jimmy aside. "How much have you eaten?" he whispered.

"I don't know, maybe a quarter of the storage."

"A QUARTER?!?" Jimmy's startled family caused him to return to a whisper. "A quarter? How the fuck have you already eaten that much?"

"Mr. Clevens..."

"I think we're beyond that Jimmy. Call me Robert."

He swallowed hard before continuing, "Robert...it's the girls. They eat so much more than their mother and I. It's something to do with the younger age and higher metabolism. We never saw it in the test groups because we didn't use children. They're eating constantly. At this rate, there might be a few weeks of food left."

"But with us here it will diminish even quicker," observed Robert.

"So what do we do now?" I asked. Robert looked at me almost like he forgot I was standing next to him. "We can't survive without more food."

"She's right sir. Where are we going to find more?" Jimmy asked.

Two weeks after arriving where I thought I was going to be for the next year, I was once again approaching the city. The food only lasted ten days and then we were back on the road in search of nourishment. We found some in abandoned vehicles or gas stations we passed, but, being in the country, there wasn't enough to find. Even though it was dangerous, I came to the conclusion that we needed to go back to the city. Searching homes and apartments, along with the stores, we were bound to find something. What we found wasn't what we had hoped for.

Back in the city, I always had a much easier time finding food, but it was also more dangerous. So far though, I've been lucky, which isn't something everyone had the fortune of saying. Finishing off the thigh, I lick the bone clean before tossing it across the room. The bone lands on the tile, sliding across the floor towards a vending machine. Suddenly it ricochets to the left puzzling me. Moving across the room to investigate what it hit, I score a huge find.

Lying on its side in front of the machine is an unopened can of cola. I elate with excitement as my fingertips touch the side of the can, feeling the cool aluminum. I'm overjoyed with the treasure I accidentally discovered. Lifting it off the dirty floor, I rub my thumb over the top, removing the layer of dirt. I may have been a vegetarian but I'd always been a sugar junkie when it came to soda. I hadn't had one since before the outbreak. I pull the tab and hear a symphony of sound as the can cracks and hisses. I couldn't ask for a more beautiful addition to my meal. Fresh meat and a can of cola; it might as well be Thanksgiving.

We'd spent a month in the city and, sadly, it was a day I remember all too well. When it came, it wasn't a day for celebrations. Robert and I held shotguns pointed at the twin daughters of Robert's assistant Jimmy. The family had been traveling with us since the cabin, but it took until that moment to learn that children had become the most dangerous thing on the planet. King Kong and Godzilla had nothing on kids. Their hunger never stopped, it was never satisfied, and nothing was off the menu if the stomach beckoned long enough.

We'd heard stories but took them as just that, stories. There was no way a human could resort to what they were saying, regardless of the hunger. We were incredibly and horribly wrong. The twins were on their knees, chests covered in blood, as each of them dug into the flesh of their parents, now serving as dinner.

Robert must have seen it coming. He kept seeming like he wanted to abandon the family but I don't think his heart would let him. I thought it was sheer selfishness at first, but, in hind sight, I see it was out of fear. He somehow knew what could happen if they went long enough without food. Now, the sweet little girls had blood spilling off their chins as they sucked their fingers dry of what remained of Jimmy and his wife. This is what the world had come to; all because of a little pill that was meant to make life easier.

"It's time," said Robert standing next to me. Raising our weapons and taking aim, the little girls looked at us with sadness in their eyes. They appeared to understand that what they were doing was wrong but couldn't control themselves. It almost made you want to just leave them be, but we knew what they'd become. Staring down the barrel at what had once been an innocent angel, I prepared to fire. The girls realized the sad puppy eyes weren't going to stop the inevitable, so they changed tactics.

It had been an act; they didn't regret anything about their actions. Dissolve had altered their brains to care about nothing but the hunger. They glanced at one another before turning back to us with furrowed brows and bared teeth. Shrieking, they charged us. Quick flashes, and a boom that caused my ears to ring, were the precursor to the end as their bodies flew backwards. The force of the blasts sent their bodies flailing into the wall.

"I can't believe this. After everything, how could it end like this?" I asked with tears streaking my cheek. Robert pulled me into his chest as I began sobbing. My voice was muffled by his jacket as I asked, "What happens when we're in their shoes? What happens when we go long enough without food?"

I feel the soda spill out onto my tongue, the fizzy bubbles tickling my cheeks as it washes down my throat. The sugary concoction is delicious. Taking another sip, I savor the flavors filling me with happiness. Carrying the can back to my corner of the convenience store, I look down at my meal and see that I still have plenty left. It's hard to believe that we made it another four months after shooting the twins, scavenging everything we could find. There is only so long, however, you can go with the incredible hunger gnawing away at you before you do something you'll regret. I soon discovered that with nothing to keep it at bay, a person is capable of anything. After a week without anything to eat, I learned exactly what someone can do at the brink.

My beautiful Robert looks up at me with a dim fog over his eyes, almost cloudy. The hunger reached a boiling point, and my better nature shut down in favor of it. I couldn't help my actions, but as

I stand here, the hunger subsided for the moment; my eyes are a torrent as I fall to my knees. I look down at him, running my fingers across his cheek. He bled out as I fed upon him, tears streaming my face. I detested myself in this moment, but the hunger always wins. With a full stomach, anyone can look at what I did with disgust as I do now. However, when the hunger infects your brain you are driven beyond human nature. I became something inhuman and maniacal, and I killed my love. In the end, it did have the affect of slowly returning my senses with each bite. If I'm not careful, I'll waste away into one of the bingers, and that would be a fate worse than death.

The bingers are mindless eating machines without remorse; every shred of humanity tainted by the Dissolve in their bloodstream. I can't allow myself to become one of their ranks. I hate myself for feasting on him, but to become a binger means to lose that remorse. My actions were that of desperation when the hunger took over. I want to die for what I've done, but the urge to survive is hard to ignore. I will forever have to live with the memory.

Those that are lucky enough to find food and stay human, they'll never have to suffer the way I have today. To become one of the drones was to lose your humanity. You either kill them or become their next meal. For that reason, groups have begun forming to aid one another. There has been talk of a small colony of people that are all Dissolve free. Supposedly, they have never taken the drug.

We were on our way there when our food ran short. It's amazing we lasted as long as we did without turning on each other, but if I don't find more to eat, my fate will soon be that of the drones. To scour the world as a binger is not what I hope fate has in store for me. I will find more food, I will locate this colony, and I will learn to cope with my curse. But what fate has planned isn't something I'll discern today.

I have to find help. There are surely others out there like me, still human and searching for a cure. Whether I succeed or not is a story for another day, but I have to do what I can in hopes to see tomorrow. I look down at what remains of Robert's corpse. It disgusts me, but I have to survive. I grab a large knife from the store shelf and cut his body into smaller pieces. I feel my eyes water as I use plastic wrap to preserve the leftovers. I love you Robert, but I must survive. The hunger comes first.