



FACELESS

by

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Synopsis of Faceless

When average man John Smith finds himself in the midst of a proclaimed pandemic, he complies with governmental and scientific directives as any good citizen would. Nevertheless, he remains confused whether the pandemic is real or imagined, whether it is life threatening or hysteria-driven. Regardless, he complies and becomes an eye-witness to his own willingness to surrender personal liberty for the illusion of security. Although a pandemic survivor, he becomes just another faceless person left to contemplate what he has lost in the new world order.

(Inspired by true events, written by a faceless person currently locked up in an apartment for three months and counting.)

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Chapter One

The work bell rings. I stand by the door. There is the click releasing the locking mechanism. I count. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. I reach for the door handle and enter the hallway. Down the steps I go, just catching a flittering glimpse of the person ten feet in front of me as they turn the landing. I wonder who they are. I am 25456CBIA. That is what is stamped on all my protective gear. Masks, gloves, clothing, boots. PPGs. Personal Protective Gear. Never heard that term before the plague. Now it is common knowledge. Without PPGs, I would be dead.

I exit the building into the bright light of the sun. It is a beautiful morning. Early Spring. Maybe April. No, probably May. Too warm to be April and the garden is in its final prep. I used to have a calendar. It kept me on track. Now I just follow the prescribed routine. I even used to know when my shift started. But I have lost track of time since they removed all the clocks. They were stressing people out, I was told. But, with the sun at a slight angle, I guess it may be around mid-morning. I don't know. Guess it doesn't matter.

I had already been swept along as we all marched to the community garden, maintaining our proper social distance. Everyone had their PPGs on, neatly pressed and cleaned. It was always a beautiful sight to see the rainbow of colors spread out across the garden as everyone went to their assigned station. In the early days, the Committee had considered standard colors for everyone – white, maybe blue. But the wise Committee decided that such conformity would be akin to creating a dystopian society, you know, like in some old “B” horror movie. Our new society instead championed collectiveness; compartmentalized unity. PPGs were allowed to be multicolored and every citizen was issued three sets; a mix and match set as the citizen wished. Individualism was allowed, even encouraged, because we are all in this together.

I wasn't always 25456CBIA. I once was John Smith. Common name. And I was a common guy. Once had a Latina girlfriend. She was hot, sexy, crazy as a bat. I was enamored with her. She called me white bread. Not because I am a white guy. But because I was common – plain. I didn't see the insult. Anyway. That relationship didn't last.

I do miss the pretty girls. I know they are here, I just can't see them through their PPGs. Every shape is the same across the garden. No one is fat anymore. We all seem to be the same size. I don't even see tall and short forms anymore. Sometimes, I wonder where they all went. For a while I concocted all sorts of conspiracy theories in my head as I worked the field. But an interesting thing about conspiracy theories, if you can't share them with anyone, they seem to be irrelevant. Talking to fellow citizens was not allowed. Not because we were censured, but because it was my responsibility to protect my fellow citizens – an act of love and caring. I surely did not want to infect a good citizen because I wanted to gossip. That was how the virus spread.

I slowly worked the dirt, drifting from thought to thought, and every once in a while, I would glance at citizen 0310, something, something, CBIA. I'm pretty sure she was a beautiful young woman, naked underneath her PPG, with small beads of sweat trickling down her soft breasts, slowly following gravity to her . . . Of course, that is what I envisioned for all the faceless citizens scattered throughout the community garden. I was the only man working in the midst of a potential harem of beautiful, erogenous women. That is what kept me going. Then the doubt would emerge.

Perhaps, underneath every PPG was a middle aged, hairy guy, stuck with me in this God-forsaken world. It took all I could not to rip off my mask, run to 0310, something, something, CBIA and rip off their mask. The curiosity, the desire, gnawed at my soul. If only I could get closer. Violate the social distance. Maybe I could tell if my fellow citizen was male or female. At least, I could finally read the fucking number on 0310, something, something, CBIA. My hands

slowly moved to my mask. My heart was pounding. And then the cease bell was rung. She – had to be a she – moved away to depart from the field. Ten feet from everyone. I turned to take my place in line. The workday was over.

Chapter Two

I was raised in a small town with small town values. Work hard, be honest, be modest, be friendly, play by the rules, be humble, live according to one's means and life will be good and fulfilling. Now that I have lived most of my life, it would seem, I realize, that was all bullshit.

I was grumpy. I had finished my disinfectant, sterilization, purification, eradication routine. Now I sat staring out my little apartment window at the cloudless blue sky. I was pissed off at 0310, something, something, CBIA. Couldn't she at least give me some sign. Women know how to flirt. No PPG could stop her if she wanted. Only conclusion – she didn't want too. Fucking bitch. OK. Maybe that's too far. Why was I mad at 0310, something, something, CBIA? It wasn't **his** fault. Women are dead to me. Move on. My mind drifted back to my life before the new normal.

I once had a steady job. And I was proud that I could pay my bills. No freeloader here. But I didn't trust anyone. All the people that I knew were friendly but superficial. For instance, my "best friend" at work was someone I had known for a decade. But I was never invited to his house, could not pick out his wife in a lineup, and never considered asking him to take me anywhere in an emergency. But that was ok. I kind'a liked it that way. I didn't have any real obligations to him, either. If I ever left or he left the company, we would have shook hands, smiled, wished each other luck and swore that we would keep in touch. Within a short time, I would have forgotten his name. It had happened before, and it would have happened again. That was ok. I didn't expect that anyone would actually remember my name once they had packed and moved on. But that was ok. I kind'a liked it that way.

So now what?

It had to be time to wash my hands again. I hope my buzzer isn't broken. I need to wash my hands every thirty minutes. Yes, I know what you are thinking, I hadn't left my apartment since returning from the garden. But I had to wash my hands. It was not just a routine. It was not compulsive. It was a matter of life or death. So-say the Committee. I believe them. They had saved me. What was there to question? My mind drifted.

I once read a book on the Bubonic Plague. It was filled with firsthand accounts of those that lived during the epidemic. I remember one account in which the author noted each day how many members of his family died. Eventually he was the last one alive and then the journal entry ended. Nobody really knows what happened to the guy but the assumption was that he died. I never could quite come to terms with his disappearance. A voice in the midst of a great tragedy had suddenly went quiet. People say that those who work in the aftermath of natural disasters, digging people out of the rubble, make similar observations. They hear a voice. They try and locate it and suddenly it disappears. It haunts them.

But the interesting thing is that even though we all know about such great tragedies – epidemics, wars, tsunamis, floods, and a myriad of other things that wipe away human life in a blink of an eye, little is written about the aftermath. What happened to the survivors? What happened to society? I guess the assumption is that they survived and life went on; end of story.

There's the buzzer. Thank God it wasn't broken. I went to the sink and began scrubbing my hands counting backward from sixty. Some say this is a good time to say the Thank You Prayer: "I give my heart and soul in joy to the President's Blue-Ribbon Committee which through their divine wisdom and scientific foresight have saved me and my society from doom. Blessed be the Blue-Ribbon Committee and their assistants for without them my future would be a tomb." Or something like that.

I dried my hands and wondered if I was like that faceless survivor of the fourteenth century that I had once read about. I sat down and began to write. For posterity. For John Smith.

Chapter Three

I survived the modern-day version of the Bubonic Plague. Billions of people supposedly were to die of a disease that still to this day nobody really knows where, when, and how it arrived. Some say Sub-Saharan Africa, some say China, some say our own governmental research facilities. Beyond that, I still don't know how many people were infected, how many people actually died, where they buried all of them – if they were buried – and why, all of a sudden, the disease disappeared. A vaccine was never developed and widely circulated. Or at least I never got a shot. No new drugs were placed on the market. I heard of some, but I never saw any and nobody prescribed them to me, so I don't know if they exist, are only for certain people, or being hoarded. And when I asked about the numbers of dead, people looked at me in horror and with their eyes told me to just move on. I was lucky. I was alive. What more did I want? Uh, maybe some answers.

I saw bodies being hauled out of hospitals, apartment buildings, houses. Oh, not in my neighborhood, but on TV. It must have been real. Although nobody that I actually knew died, I heard many stories of someone who knew someone who was near someone who died in the plague. And during the height of the pandemic, I was glued to my TV, computer, and radio. Everywhere there were experts and analysts, commentators and bureaucrats. I was constantly warned that any day I could die. That the invisible hand of mortality was lurking everywhere, snatching poor souls from their slumber, their jobs, their hiding places. I was told what to do by these people if I was to have even a miniscule chance of surviving. I should never leave my apartment. I should sit in the dark so as not to attract any attention, as if the virus would see me and

attack. I should always be fully clothed in case I died and the Body Snatchers had to come and haul me away. And I needed to take at least two showers a day, wash my hands every thirty minutes, sanitize and disinfect my quarters every morning, and never, never leave mass media in case the government issued more guidelines to save my pitiful little life from a merciless, unforgiving, tyrannical hidden enemy. We were at war with God, for only he or she (to be politically correct), could be responsible for such human misery. My only hope came from the government bureaucrats. They would save me. They would save humanity – most of which I could barely tolerate anyway – they would save society. This was not a time to pray, to go to church, to question or think for myself. This was a unique, critical time for the entire planet; for humanity. Not since the Black Death has human existence been so threatened. But I was told, we now live in different, greater times. We have modern science. We have professionals in government who understand the threat and have a plan. Government could save me. Fuck you God. . . Really?

Now, I am not overtly religious. I was raised Catholic. Went to Catholic grade school. But, once I hit high school, I had trouble coming to grips with a lot of the hypocrisy of the church. I don't need to expand. You know what I mean. So gradually I drifted away. I guess I always expected some nun or priest to knock on my door and drag me off to the Inquisition where I would be "invited" back into the fold. But it never happened. I guess I either was not wanted or was simply irrelevant. Maybe that was when I first realized that I was really on my own. To be part of someone's group one had to ante up, give a tithe so to speak, otherwise the group moved on and one became socially ostracized. I used to sit and ask, "What about my soul? Isn't anyone going to come and for the sake of my soul, invite me back into the fold?" It turned out – nope. You're on your own.

Now my Protestant friends would remind me how bad the Catholic Church was and that I should have a direct and personal connection with God, that was why I felt lost and

alone. It was God's plan for me to be on my own when seeking salvation. It was an individual's personal journey. If I wanted, however, I could join their community of believers. But really, they did not mean that. For if I did not want to go to their Bible classes, their food pantries, their weekly services of faith, I really was as irrelevant to them as I was to the Catholic Church. So, like millions of other people living in modern, industrial society, I began to checkout other ideologies, from Islam and Buddhism to mysticism and socialism. Guess what, same rules apply. Group membership still meant being subservient to someone else who seemed to have the inside track to knowledge. Gnosticism in the modern world was just as secretive as it was in the ancient world.

So, when the plague hit, God was out. Science and bureaucrats were in. I was a lemming running for the cliff. I sat and watched my various video screens as my leaders worked to lead me out of bondage to the promise land. We were on a great Exodus, leaving what was, to go to, what will be. Somewhere along that trip, I wandered off, looked around, and began to ask, is this real?

Chapter Four

The beginning bell rang. I hadn't gotten much sleep. I only wrote for a while but my thoughts about the past swarmed through my mind and it was a fitful sleep. I got up, went to the cleaning station and began my disinfectant, sterilization, purification, eradication routine. Then I had a piece of cheese and a small glass of water. I slipped on my PPG without the mask and gloves, and sat down to wait for the work bell to ring.

I remember when it began. It was Taco Tuesday. I was sitting in a booth, eating a taco, and day-dreaming about fishing in Minnesota. But I could not help but hear the people sitting behind me. Three guys wearing City Electrical Company shirts were breaking for lunch. With my back to them, I was sucked into their conversation.

“Did you hear what’s going on overseas?” one asked.

“What?” a disembodied voice responded.

“All those people dying of some strange disease.”

“Really?”

“Yea,” said the third guy. “They were eating monkeys and got infected with some strange virus or some bug.”

“No, it was bats,” corrected the first voice.

That is when I first learned about the plague. I still don’t know where it came from or how, but I swear to God, I will never eat a monkey or a bat. Of course, the only monkeys I know of are locked away in the zoo, and unless one of them can talk, like Caesar in the *Planet of the Apes*, I do not think they were the ones that launched germ warfare on humanity. And the only bats I use to see always came out during Halloween, and they were mostly made of rubber. So, probably not a real threat there. But it would still be satisfying to know where it had originated and how. At least that was what the medical experts on TV promised in their side comments as they held their daily briefings. I, like millions, dutifully watched the daily briefings. But I never heard the answer, and now, nobody seems to really care anymore. Just move on. Be glad you are alive.

I heard the work bell ring. I put my gloves and mask on and stood by the door. There was the click releasing the locking mechanism. I counted. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. I reached for the door handle and entered the hallway. Down the steps I went, just catching a glimpse of the person ten feet in front of me as they turned on the landing. I wondered who they were.

Chapter Five

My back hurt. I tried to distract myself with sexual thoughts involving 0310, something, something, CBIA but just could not muster up the effort. I went back to breaking up the dirt clods. Won’t be long before we will be seeding the garden. The day was gray and to the west darker clouds rested on the

horizon. In the old days, I bet I would have smelled the scent of coming rain. But now my PPG prevented that. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw a commotion. Something was going on in the northwest quadrant of the garden. We all stopped and watched.

A citizen had ripped off her mask. I'm sure it was a woman. Maybe not. Too far away to know for certain. They were being chased by the Garden Assistants. They zig-zagged across the garden. Citizens repelled away from them and each other like a synchronized dancing flock of finches, trying to maintain their social distance from each other. Yes, Yes! It was a woman! Middle-aged, gray hair. Didn't matter. She was the most beautiful thing I had seen in . . . well forever. Yes, Yes! There were women in the field! Run lady, run, I shouted in my head. I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. I knew where this was heading. I had forgotten but not really. It rushed back. I had seen this before. She was tackled and the Garden Assistants dragged her to the edge of the garden, stripped her naked, and spray washed her. Standing bare for those who still watched, which was nobody, since we all lowered our heads and went back to breaking up dirt clods, the old woman was doused with orange disinfectant and hauled off to the resting ambulance parked next to the last residential building. We knew that only someone infected with the virus would act this way. The Committee had told us. We would never see that poor citizen again. My heart felt heavy. For her or me, I was not sure.

Chapter Six

Within a week of Taco Tuesday, the problems halfway around the world was the lead story for every newscast. At work, it became the favorite watercooler conversation. For the most part, it seemed irrelevant and I continued to go about my business. But I had already been infected. It was slowly worming its way into my brain and subconscious. I began to find myself glued to newscasts and late-night radio

conversations. I avoided the internet, but that did not matter, because every coworker I talked to consistently updated me on the newest thing they had seen; some blog, some YouTube video; some bogus Ted Talk from a pseudo expert. The chicken-little chorus had begun. And against my better judgment. I listened. And then the headaches began.

I grew up with headaches. Not migraines. Thank God. But that nagging type of headache that starts at the back of your neck and slowly migrates to your temples. They would come and go. Rarely did I take an aspirin for them. I found that if I just calmed myself, laid on the floor, and listened to music, they generally would go away. Seventies rock seemed to work the best. I would dream of being in the band, the lead singer and a master of musical instruments, the recipient of praise and thrown underwear from adorning women. Soon my headache would be gone.

As I got older, the headaches reappeared. Rarely did I find the time to lie on the floor and listen to music. Too busy. Too many adult responsibilities. That is when I started a routine of aspirin. It seemed that I was always popping pills to get rid of the nagging headaches. A psychologist friend suggested they were stress induced. Stress? Me stressed? What a laughable suggestion. I was as cool as a cucumber. Well, maybe on the outside. Not so much on the inside. I had a habit of overanalyzing everything. Questioning everything, constantly seeking the reasons behind every action I saw. It drove my friends and wife nuts. Especially when I would get angry and frustrated when the answers seemed to always revolve around someone else's incompetence, greed, or just down right, meanness. The headaches grew. My skepticism about society grew. Then one day, I lost my job. Within a year, my wife left me. Soon I was bankrupt and forced into a simpler life. No credit cards. No mortgage. No expectations. Just survival mode. And best of all. No headaches. It remained that way for years. Then came the plague and the headaches returned.

I was confused at first. I slowly became aware that I was consistently waking up with that old nagging pain in the back of my neck and shoulders and would feel it crawl towards my forehead. I resisted the pills as best I could, and once I got distracted at work, many times they would simply fade away. But one day in the grocery store, I decided to pick up, not one, but two bottles of aspirin. Not the ones containing a hundred coated pills, but the ones with the maximum five hundred pills. Ok. What was going on? That is when it registered that the old headaches had returned. But what had changed? I was still poor and divorced but employed and staying ahead of my bills. I had even begun flirting with a young woman at the convenience store. We soon began dating.

I couldn't help it though. I began to worry that I had caught the plague, the monkey virus or bat bacteria. But there were no reported cases in the nation and all the experts, except a few lone-wolves, maintained that it was a minor and exotic outbreak of a mystery disease that was still half-way around the world and would never get to me. But more and more, I heard conspiracy theories bantered around. People began to jokingly say they were stocking up supplies for the end of the world. I began to wonder if they really were joking. So, what the hell, I began to over-shop.

At first, I just bought routine household supplies and food a little ahead of my monthly schedule. Then I would decide to stop by the store on my way home from work to just "pick up a few things" and would leave with a full cart. I live alone. I never buy a full cart of groceries. But all of a sudden, it seemed that I needed more and more. My apartment started to become crowded. Me or the cans of tuna needed to stop.

Then I heard that one country established a law that if they found anyone hoarding it was a capital offense. I looked around my apartment and tried to rationalize the four stacks of toilet paper and numerous cans of Beance Weenees that sat on my shelf. I actually hadn't eaten a can of Beance Weenees since I was in grade school. But there they were. Tin soldiers waiting for the coming plague. That's when the bubble burst.

What the fuck am I doing?

I started to observe what was going on with increased skepticism. The President had put together a “blue ribbon committee” to advise her on how to prepare the country for the coming plague that was soon to arrive. And then came the reports. It was already here. The President was too late. The charge of incompetency came immediately from journalists. Medical experts reported that the nation was not prepared. Drastic actions had to be taken or millions of people would die. It was a Pandemic! Nobody was safe! Prepare yourself! I looked at my stack of Beanie Weenees. Glanced at my extra toilet paper. Ha, ha. But I was not convinced. Nobody had died yet. Give me the numbers.

I tried to avoid the grocery store. Went about my normal life. Got up each morning. Ate a light breakfast. Went to work. Went out to lunch at my regular spots. BS’ed with my colleagues. And finally returned home and settled in for the evening. I avoided the news.

But there it was. Panic had set in.

Chapter Seven

My boss cancelled all company travel for employees. An important conference meeting was postponed. Coworkers began to call in sick. Not that they were sick, but they wanted time to prepare. For what, I still was not sure. Then across every legitimate and fake news outlet was the report of the first confirmed death of the mystery disease. People needed a name. What should it be called? And then it was reported. Another old person had died in a nursing home. Everyone speculated that it must have been the mystery disease, although nobody in the medical community seemed to know. But it now had a name: Grim’s Disease. The nation watched as the disease spread along the coasts. The President’s Blue-Ribbon Committee went into action. I went back to the store.

Within days, things disappeared from the store shelves. Water, toilet paper, cleaners, soup, milk, Beanie Weenees. I

already had enough. Thank God I did it early. But then again, thank God I was not one of those crazy, foolish people preparing for death. Ok, so I did buy a can of sardines. Just in case.

The President and the Blue-Ribbon Committee issued voluntary guidelines to save oneself. It was a grim time in the nation I was told. Stores were asked to limit customers. People were told to social distance themselves from each other. Avoid touching and talking to each other, for who knew who carried the disease? Eventually my boss went from limiting my work hours to saying I could work from home to simply, see you later, company was closing and I was now laid off. The nation's economy crashed. But we were told that this was what was needed if we were going to save lives. We must isolate ourselves but we were not alone. Something was wrong.

Yes, there was a new disease that had shown up. It made people feverish and weak. Some had trouble breathing. Some even died. But most survived. Some even got Grim's and didn't even know they had it. They felt fine. A few brave souls started to calculate the mortality rate. It was very low. But the Blue-Ribbon Committee called that fake news. Such a determination could not be done until we had a way to test for the disease. Until there were tests, we simply had to trust the President and her Blue-Ribbon Committee. So, people asked, where were the tests?

People got sick. Society panicked. Each day the government promised more tests, more medical supplies, better healthcare infrastructure, financial support for those laid off, and assurance that things would get better. But until then, voluntary recommendations needed to be mandatory. And one Blue-Ribbon spokesperson said, "I need to take away your freedom now. But don't worry. I will give it back once we have this under control." I began to wonder what she was trying to control; me or Grim's?

My neighbor bought a second refrigerator and stocked it up with frozen pizzas. My friend stopped going out of his

house after he purchased more beer and stored it in his basement. My new girlfriend from the convenience store began to cancel our dates. Saying that she was having panic attacks and was too stressed. She sat in the dark hiding under blankets with her cat lying across her legs. She sat in silence. Wouldn't even turn on the TV or radio. I texted her every day to see how she was doing, offering to drop stuff off for her. She always politely refused. I didn't push. Eventually her text responses came back delayed or not at all. My love life just became another casualty of Grim's Disease. I began to see the Faceless people.

Chapter Eight

My mask was always the last thing I put on once I heard the work bell ring. I wish it was made out of softer cloth with skull and bones on it or perhaps little pirates. But it was always the most bland and functional part of my PPG – a white plastic mask. All masks were white. Fucking racists.

The runaway woman in the field had happened . . . well not sure anymore, but a while ago. Or perhaps, I had just imagined it. Oh well. Anyway, I had been spending more time writing down my thoughts about the past. I was not so sure it was such a good idea anymore. I was having some old thoughts that troubled me; that disturbed me. The Thank You Prayer, the part I could remember, made me laugh.

I stood by the door waiting for the locking mechanism to release. Maybe I won't wear my mask. Then I heard the click. I felt the back of my head, checking to make sure that my mask was secure. I had lost count. I went out the door anyway. I almost bumped into another citizen who jerked away from me in horror. Shit. Sorry. My mistake. They did not wait to read my mind as they scurried off down the stairs. I wasn't sure if I was too early or too late in joining the line. I just followed.

Outside I stood in line as the Garden Assistant was mumbling something. I looked at the citizen ten feet in front

of me. Asshole. I didn't mean to bump into you. Mother fucker, piece of shit. I should kick your ass, stupid son of a bitch. I wanted to take off my mask and yell at all of these mother fuckers. And then the thought hit me. Maybe I was infected. Oh my God! Calm down! Breathe slowly. Focus. Fuck, I am going to die. Fuck, Fuck, Fuck. And then I saw her. 0310, something, something, CBIA. She was looking at me from the other line. Only thing I could see were her beautiful eyes. They were smiling at me. Then I saw the sign. Seed Day. Oh, what a beautiful day! My heart pounded with new found joy. We were going to begin planting the garden today. And I had a friend. 0310**1957**CBIA. A face among the faceless.

Chapter Nine

At first it came as a surprise. I saw one guy wearing earmuffs on a bright, sunny, warm spring day. Then I saw people wearing mittens and gloves, some even using duct tape to fasten them to their jackets. Then I saw a girl wearing a ski mask. It was seventy degrees out. What the hell. Then came the face masks.

The Blue-Ribbon Committee told us that social distancing was not enough. We had to stay home; self-isolate. And if you did go outside, wear gloves and masks. Not to protect yourself, but to protect others. Business owners, governors, and local mayors were told by the Blue-Ribbon Committee that they needed to limit traffic and gatherings of people and that it was best if they planned for a complete lock down. Tape appeared everywhere on the ground, both inside and outside, directing traffic flow. Arguments and insults were triggered if someone mistakenly went the wrong way. Towns began to limit sidewalk traffic, first by making each side of the street one way, then imposing fines for violators. Soon all parks and “nonessential” businesses were closed down to the public. Unemployment went from ten percent to thirty percent. The nation's economy collapsed. People sat alone in

their cars in long food lines. Supplies, when they were available, were delivered to your door. Daily the President and the Blue-Ribbon Committee told us that things were improving. But were they?

Still medical tests, although we were told that they had been improved and manufactured, never seemed to get done. Experts still could not say who was and was not infected or who had survived and were now immune to Grim's. The confirmed death tolls seemed to only represent two percent of the nation's population, a far cry of the death toll of the Bubonic Plague of the fourteenth century, which wiped out an estimated fifty percent of European and Middle Eastern populations. Or even the dreaded smallpox that swept aside thirty percent of Native Americans during the Colonial Era.

In fact, as I sat in my apartment for hours on end, all I heard was that the government had successfully built medical equipment, temporary hospitals, and passed legislation that would relieve me of unexpected financial burdens. That I just needed to trust the government. That they knew best how to save me.

So, I sat. I stopped texting my girlfriend. I stopped going to pick up my mail. I tried to read but instead I found it easier to just sit and listen to music. Then I stopped doing that. So, I just sat. There was nothing to watch on free broadcast TV and I couldn't afford internet or satellite anymore. Besides all the TV shows were reruns. Grim's had put an end to the production of new shows. All sport activities had ceased. Leagues went bankrupt. Stadiums sat empty. Churches were ordered closed. At first, some defiant ministers stayed open but then they were fined, incarcerated, and eventually sent to reeducation camps for the Public Good. Eventually the only live entertainment was the Blue-Ribbon Committee's briefings.

The Committee's briefings became my routine. They reported that everything was under control. The infection curve had been stabilized and was leveling off as long as everyone obeyed the Committee's mandates. Minimal financial aid and resources were promised and would be

provided to everyone equally, except for those that were already disadvantaged prior to Grim's. Well, they would get a little extra, just to make it fair. Differentiation meant equality.

Chapter Ten

03101957CBIA played coy with me. She worked a few lines away from me and never looked at me. But I could tell she wanted me. The garden was doing well. Everything was perfect. What a wonderful life. I didn't have Grim's. My mask stayed on.

Chapter Eleven

A series of mandates were approved by the Committee for the Public Good; to save lives; to save society. No one was allowed to leave their residence unless they had documents proving that their travel was essential for the Public Good. Unauthorized assembly, violating social distance, not wearing gloves or masks when outside, walking in the wrong direction, and hoarding resources, all were subject to intervention and reeducation. Reeducation was a benefit provided to the citizens at the government's expense for the Public Good. A benefit for all. And so, routine dwelling inspections began to be carried out to see if anyone was hoarding, or perhaps, we were told, needed "special assistance." It was all for the Public Good. Some citizens began to question the motives of the Committee.

For the Public Good, the Committee determined that the spreading of fake news, which generally meant any criticism of the Committee's actions or questions regarding the danger of Grim's Disease, was illegal. Warnings were not issued to accused violators but instead they were simply detained in reeducation facilities in order to stop them from spreading malicious and seditious information. News agencies, of all qualities, began to disappear. Layoffs of journalists were initially explained as a consequence of the difficult economic

times, but then they simply became a result of Committee dictates. The only news fit for the public was that provided by the Committee. To suggest otherwise was a sign of needed reeducation.

Chapter Twelve

The Garden Assistants reassigned work spaces today. They moved 03101957CBIA to a different quadrant. I no longer could see her. She blended in with the other faceless figures bent over tending to the crops. I missed her even though we had never spoken and I could not remember the last time she looked at me. All I knew was that life sucked. I picked a red tomato from the plant I was tending and slowly squeezed it in my gloved hand. I saw the red juice slip through my fingers and freaked out. I bent over and quickly buried the murdered tomato. Such behavior would raise suspicions among the Garden Assistants let alone my fellow citizens. 03101957CBIA deserved better.

Chapter Thirteen

I knew what had happened. I am not ignorant of great novels and history that had both warned and documented the destruction of personal liberty for the sake of governmental imposed security. I grew up in a nation that had been built by generations of men and women who had fought for individual liberty against government tyranny, no matter how paternalistic the rationale was. But, even before Grim's, many people in my nation were beginning to demand that liberty be redefined, not as an individual freedom to pursue one's own pathway to happiness and prosperity, but as a group defined characteristic measured by a redefined sense of equality; an equality measured not by opportunity but by outcome. It no longer was enough to say that everyone should have equal access to opportunities to pursue their own potential. Now it meant that everyone had to be equal in wealth and income.

Natural social stratification that was based upon individual merit was considered a fallacy; a façade. Instead, people were beginning to feel that all stratification was a result of inherent social prejudice and discrimination. One did not fail because of personal short-comings but because the system had failed.

A social Robin Hood mentality took over where one person's success and happiness was discounted if someone else did not have the same happiness and success. Such a standard was impossible to meet. People are inherently different. That is good. Variety is what makes the human species successful, not only in terms of simple evolutionary processes (uniformity leads to extinction), but it is necessary for society. It provides dynamism, innovation, entrepreneurship which are needed to generate progress. Happiness and success, whether measured in material items or cognitively, are always personal. To think that everyone's definition of utopia must be the same is foolish and ultimately dangerous. But that did not matter to a growing number of people before Grim's. There was already a movement to define individual rights as a threat to group survival.

I remember watching how those who sought power to limit individuality were, nevertheless, frustrated by the stubbornness and the push back they received by "individualists." They could not gain the needed power to remake society in their image. They concluded that they needed to bring the system down. Crash it. Then they could resurrect it in their own image. If people had to die in the process, so be it. They would create their utopia if just given the chance.

Every great conqueror in history has felt the same way. The list is long: Sargon, Hammurabi, Cyrus, Alexander, Julius Caesar, Asoka, Zhen, Justinian, Mu'awiya, Charlemagne, William I, Genghis Khan, Charles V, Catherine, Napoleon, Victoria, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Hideki Tojo, Mao Zedong, to name a few. They all felt that they were liberators; liberating people from tyrannical rulers or a tyrannical society. And they all felt that they were the instrument to bring about

a better society. If millions of people had to die in order to make way for a better society, so be it. It was their mission, it was their destiny. In fact, many felt even divinely ordained. And now, Grim's Disease had brought into my life the Committee.

Chapter Fourteen

I think I am infected. I still follow my disinfectant, sterilization, purification, eradication routine. I still wash my hands every thirty minutes. I don't say the Thank You Prayer. Even in jest. I do spend a lot of time writing down my thoughts. My questions. I wonder a lot about what 3101957CBIA is doing. I close my eyes and try to remember her eyes peering out over her mask at me, but to be honest, I really cannot remember them. She has faded into the faceless masses that I am beginning to resent every morning. Maybe I should just take off my mask and let Grim take me.

Chapter Fifteen

The Committee already could point out their successes. They had prevented Grim's Disease from killing us all. How many they actually saved was indeterminant, but rest assure, if they had not taken control, we all would have died. In addition, they had corrected the failed health care system as long as you did not try and use it. "We want to avoid overwhelming it," they said. In fact, doctors and allied health workers were dismissed so that they would not be available for "nonessential" medical care so as not to interfere with "essential" medical care. If too many people tried to use the health care system, the Committee warned, it would mean rationing. So just stay healthy, that is what a good citizen must do for the Public Good. Stop smoking, drinking, and eating too much. Exercise daily in your residence. If you do this the Committee will save you and not have to fine you or reeducate you for the Public Good.

I learned during the briefings that they had eradicated superstition and replaced it with science. That was why they did all the testing, although they never really reported on the results. But rest assure, I was told, they are doing this by the numbers – scientifically acquired numbers. And for the Public Good, all church going was ended, not because it was an attack on religion or spirituality, heaven forbid, but that it was simply dangerous toward public health to allow congregations to meet. For Christians, Easter was cancelled because it would generate dangerous crowds and Grim's Disease would sweep through the innocents. Then Christmas was cancelled because it promoted unnecessary hoarding and the consumption of valuable resources. All this was for the Public Good and, the Committee noted, that if you were religious, obviously this was what God wanted. If you doubted, they would be happy to reeducate you. At government expense. It was the Christian thing to do.

The greatest achievement touted by the Committee, however, was the end of economic social stratification. They had successfully destroyed profit and the greed behind it. Everything was now provided for the Public Good as authorized by the Committee with its unparalleled efficient organizational skills. I no longer went to the stores because they were either closed or had little merchandise on their shelves. My Beane Weenies, tuna, and sardines were long gone. Even my toilet paper stash had been flushed down the toilet. I survived on the government rations that appeared at my door. I lost weight. But I did not starve. The Committee proclaimed that social inequality no longer existed. We were all citizens. Isolated but together. Individuals but a collective. If one wondered why members of the Committee and its Assistants seemed to live in nicer accommodations, had more food and freedom of travel, well, you were simply mistaken and perhaps needed reeducation.

So, while the plague ravished the nation, I was being educated that actually everything was better. The air was cleaner, crime was down, motor vehicle accidents were down,

energy was cheaper, people were healthier, greed had been curtailed, all thanks to the Committee. A Committee that no longer saw the need for a president, a congress, or even elections, for these were incompatible with the Public Good. Now that is something I had actually been saying for years prior to Grim's.

So, what about my girlfriend that I had met at the convenience store? Well, I learned that she had died. Not of Grim's. She had starved herself to death. Slowly melting away in fear and anxiety, steadfastly refusing help from family and friends. Refusing to leave her little basement apartment to even pick up a can of Beane Weenees, of which at the time, I still had plenty. I use to wonder who was to blame? But that was when I use to overthink things.

Chapter Sixteen

And then it was over. The Committee announced that Grim's Disease had been conquered. But based on the lessons learned from such a tragedy, the new normal would continue. For the Public Good.

So, my routine was set for me. Every day a Garden Assistant rang the bell to alert me that the day had begun. I get up, eat a light breakfast, and do my morning grooming. Of priority is to wash my hands in the morning and throughout the day every thirty minutes with Committee approved sanitizer. Once groomed and dressed, I wait for the work bell to ring. When it rings, I put on my gloves and mask and proceed to the courtyard. For the next four hours I work with my fellow citizens on the community garden, never talking, touching, or violating the social distance guidelines imposed for our own well-being. When the cease bell rings, I return to my apartment, scrub down, eat a light meal, and sit and wait until tomorrow, always remembering to wash my hands every thirty minutes. Sometimes, I peek out the little window in my apartment and watch the faceless people walk by, ten feet

apart, wondering where they are going. But such thoughts really are not for the Public Good. So-says the Committee.

I fight the urge.