**M. E. P.**

My life has become a living hellhole. It was perfect, I went to school, had friends and my family wasn’t falling a part. Then the pandemic hit , Ebola first struck Africa, and no one paid any attention in North America before it was too late. Most people were treated, some died but it was being managed. Then the virus mutated, it was stronger and more aggressive. People were bleeding internally, blood pooled in ghastly blotches on their skin and caused immense pressure on their brain. Everyone that contracted the mutated strain went crazy. They became violent and mentally unstable, a danger to everyone around them. My dad contracted the mutated strain and died. It was torture watching him deteriorate into a foreign monster I had to restrain. This drove my mother off the edge, she became depressed and isolated. It was as if a part of her died when my dad did. She constantly rambles on about the tests for being immune, “Why does Nik have the gene and Richard didn’t?” is a phrase I hear often in a hushed voice. It’s the bittersweet burden of being Immune. People always wonder why it’s not them, what makes you so special? This can make for some dangerous situations.

I wake up to a crack of light shinning through the boarded windows in my room. I have a pit in my stomach, my mom’s rambling is quiet. A rare and unsettling state in the house. Frantically I rush down the hall towards my parent’s bedroom. A heavy silence covers the house, making my pulse race. The door is closed, I hesitate. Do I really want to know what’s beyond it? I muster up all the courage I can find and quietly turn the doorknob. As the door swings open I know it’s a mistake. The room is dark and has the suffocating stench of depression and illness. Lying limp on the mattress is a distorted figure that vaguely resembles my mother. As I move towards the bed I feel the crunch of glass under my feet and tears begin to stream down my face.

“Mom!” I scream so loudly my throat is scratched.

I grab at the blankets--they’re sticking with what feels like blood. I know she’s gone. “No” is the only word in my vocabulary, replaying over and over in my head. No, no, no. My mind pieces together the events that must have occurred. She drank the wine, probably the one my parents were saving for their 50th anniversary then smashed the bottle and slit her wrists under the covers.

I stumble out of the room with my mind in a haze. I can no longer bear the sight of the house that once held so many innocent memories. They have all been corrupted by death. I want to escape this nightmare, and I pray that I’ll wake up, but I can’t kid myself. I know that no matter how much I pray, there won’t be an answer. I wish I could wash away the events that have taken place in the past five months but I know that’s impossible. I’ll never escape them. As I stand in the hallway I feel the walls closing in, removing all the air from my lungs.

The best I can do is run. I can’t stand to be in the place where I’ve lost so much. I need to leave and my body sings with the anticipation of it. I have to prepare; I can’t leave without supplies and protection, it would be like committing suicide. I gather all of the preserved food I can carry and shove it into my dad’s old hiking pack, thankful that he’s always been an outdoorsmen. While rummaging through the garage I find an old satellite radio. Bonus! I sprint back to the house and hunt for batteries in the junk drawer in my kitchen. The radio makes an ugly cracking sound as I pry open the battery pack snapping the double “A”s into place. White noise emerges from the speakers. while tinkering with the tuning I find a news station with a hysterical sounding woman declaring that Health Canada has stationed a safe haven for the surviving, where an immunization and cure can be administered. My mind is racing, where is all I can think of. The woman’s speech rambles on for what seems like forever, but only a few minutes have past. Finally

“Go to Brick Works by Pottery Rd! Medical attention and necessities are available.”

Emerges from the static riddled speakers. I exhale a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. I have a destination.

Anxiety sings through my body. I don’t know what I’ll find when I pass the threshold of the boundary that had been put up what seems like years ago. I can’t stay here so what choice do I have? I feel mentally unprepared, I’ve been so sheltered from the chaos that surrounds my home. I don’t know what’s safe. Travel at night or in the day? Should I isolate myself or seek companionship? These are questions that will have to be answered with time. Hopefully not in the form of lessons. I take the first step towards my destination. I grip a two by four and pull it towards me, engaging all of my muscles and releasing emotions in the form of physical pain to deconstruct the barrier. Every inch of my body is screaming at me to stop, my mind is detached. I can’t stop.

There’s a soft thud when I sink to my knees on my wilted front lawn, exhaustion is taking over but I need to keep moving. The streets of Toronto lay grimy yet untouched. I feel anxiety creeping in as I move farther away from my house, I guess I’ll have to get used to it. I can’t decide if it’s safer to stick to alleyways or main streets. Walking out in the open feels wrong, like I’m being watched but alleys are secluded and could hold many unwanted ventures. I keep to Queen St. East, I’d rather people see me then meet me. I need to remain on high alert but my thoughts are eating away at me. Music has always been comforting, Metric is what pops into my head. I begin to softly sing “Synthetica” between forced exhalations. I relax slightly but my muscles are ready, I can’t take the edge off. Do I want to? Next song, “Do I Wanna Know” by Artic Monkeys. I can’t believe my irony. Whatever keeps ya going I guess. Craning my neck, feeling the golden light of the sunset warming my skin. A pit blooms in my stomach, I need to find somewhere to wait out the night. Eastern Ave, not to bad for a first day. Unfortunately I’ve run through every song from my iTunes playlist and the buildings where I stand were run down before the pandemic hit. The Day’s Inn seems to call my name, it might not be the safest choice but the thought of a soft comfortable bed is too endearing. I haven’t walked that far but today’s events have taken a toll on me, my legs feel like lead and I’m having trouble keeping my eyes open. Slowly I shuffle towards the motel door, peering in through the dusty glass, it seems uninhabited. I feel the grit of rust on the door handle as my hand wraps around it. Disappointment fills me when I hear the bang of a lock hitting metal. Scanning my surroundings, there’s no one within my sight and the sky is turning a purple tint of blue. I find a brick size piece of fallen concrete, sending it flying through the glass followed by a bone rattling shatter. Carefully with the sole of my shoe I kick the excess glass that clings to the doorframe. I fling my pack off my shoulder and shove it through the hole I’ve made, minding the shards so it doesn’t rip. Then I duck through, collecting my things, and heading for the stairs. I stop in front of the first room I see with double doors on the second floor, the paint is chipping and the carpet in the hall is matted and soiled with dirt among other substances but at the moment it feels like it’s fit for a king. I plea that the door is unlocked because I don’t think I can muster up the energy required to find a solution and I have not yet become desperate enough sleep on the revolting carpet. The metal is cold against my palm, slowly I turn the handle until I hear a lock click and feel the door will to swing open. Heat returns to my hand and the door bounces off the doorstop with a muffled knock. The room is filled by the blue light of twilight. The suite looks untouched, covered in a thin layer of dust. Normally this scene would give me the creeps and inspire me to watch psycho. I couldn’t care less. I close the door and collapse onto the queen size bed. A cloud of dust enveloping me. I feel myself drift off before my head hits the musty pillow.

My eyes nearly pop out of my head when I feel a rough hand cover my mouth and jolt me upright. The room is pitch black but I feel the silky fabric of a pillowcase being shoved curtly over my head. I here heated voices in the background, shit, there’s more then one person in the room. I’m outnumbered and disorientated. I feel the hands move from my mouth to the top of my shoulder and grip my hands behind my back. Judging by the strength it’s a boy and I don’t think I could take him and the others. I feel so stupid, I made noise everywhere I went coming to the suite. They probably heard me and waited for their chance to jump. I feel the boy restraining me lean forward so his lips brush my left ear.

whispering “ You’re dead meat, dirt bag”.

I’m terrified, I want to thrash and fight back but I know it will only tire me out. My instincts tell me that the guy gripping my arms won’t hesitate to break something, it’s best to stay still with my mouth shut. The last thing I need out there are my secrets or an injury. I stumble forward as my captor kicks my legs, forcing me to stumble forwards. Behind me I hear the others rummage through my pack and rush to keep up. oomph, I’m winded, the little jerk shoved me into a door!

“Sorry, pretty boy, had to open the door somehow.”

I can hear the smile on his face. Cold air rushes over us as we walk, the echoing sound of the door slamming indicates that we’re in a staircase. Another shove forces me to move, stubbing my toe on the first step, ow! This prick is definitely compensating for something. Each shove and comment only makes me more aggravated. I want to whip around and rip this guy’s vocal cords out of his throat. I don’t, it’d only end badly but the idea is satisfying. I hear footsteps circle around us, then the click of a door handle. A gust of air greets us, smelling of B.O and must. This is without a doubt where the group spends their time. I guess there aren’t any rules about hygiene. The people around me seem unfazed by the stench. They’ve been here too long. A new voice booms towards us.

“Isaac, what d’ya got there?”

“Found this little twerp passed out on the second floor suite.”

“ While you and mousy were finding some place to do the nasty?”

“Nice, ‘Ligha.”, blurts a raspy voice. The sound of snickering and the slap of hands comes from the same direction. “Serves you right for messing with my sister.”

“Shut up Cole.” Spits a feminine voice. “I’m dying and I want a little company, is that so wrong?”

“Mouse it’s only that you’re hooking up with Isaac.” Replies Cole. Behind me I feel Isaac’s grip tighten, standing still is becoming harder. Seems like Isaac doesn’t like being emasculated in front of his girl, my lips curl into a smile.

“Stop It! Are you both really that egotistical? Bring him into the room.” The air changes in the hall, Cole and Isaac seem to shrink as Ligha’s voice roars across the corridor. We’re moving again, but Isaac is being obviously less aggressive. The feeling of my shoulders being pushed down lets me know we’ve reached what I assume is the hub of their camp. My arms are still pinned, I feel them being guided between rails on the back of a chair, then secured with what feels oddly like hockey lace. The sound of running fabric fills my ears, my eyes meeting who I assume is Ligha. He’s tall with a muscular build, I wouldn’t want to get into a fight with this guy but his eyes tell me that he wouldn’t have hurt a fly before. He’s infected, it’s apparent from the red blotches that stretch across his face, masking his olive toned skin. Slowly he walks around me, as if I’m a product for sale.

Calmly he says “What’s your name?”

licking my lips, softly I reply “Nik.”

There’s no point in lying, but I’m only giving them the information that’s necessary.

“Are you infected?” The golden question. I keep my mouth shut.

Frustration creeps into his voice, “Are. You. Infected?”

His hand moves to my jaw, gripping it so tightly I can barely move my lips to speak.

“Yes or no?”

his grip is now agonizing, I cant take it anymore.

Hastily I spit out, “I’m immune you asshole!”

‘Ligha releases my face, turning a sickly white emphasized by the red blotches that stain his skin. His shock turns into fury. it’s controlled but apparent in the contortions of his expression. Around me the room falls to a deadly silence, soon disturbed by shouts and arguments.

“What should we do with him!?”

“Is he lying?!”

I feel hands grip the back of my chair, then Isaac scream, “What makes you special?!”

Suddenly I’m flying towards the ground, still bound to the chair. My head hits the hard wood with a shock-inducing crack. A deep reddish black spills into my vision. I feel lips brush my right ear.

Then Isaac whispering, “ I’m just getting started with you.”

The shouts that fill the room slowly fade away to a low buzz.

Word Count:2443.