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After the Cure

Deirdre Gould

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The Cure

Nella tried not to think about the hundreds of people nearby, all rotting in their sleep, but the raspy hum of the flies was almost overwhelming. The heat trebled the intensity of the rotting sewage smell that hung in a cloud over them. It would be worse when they woke up and began moving around. What would they think of each other? Of themselves?

“Be ready to take notes,” Professor Taylor told his small crew, “Remember to stay back from the Infected- er *Cured* until the soldiers say it’s safe and then I want you to try to observe them as closely as possible. We don’t know if they will remember anything after infection, but for many that will have been traumatic. They may be exhibiting confusion, fear or even mild aggression. You are the only people left in the world that are trained to deal with this. History is depending on your faithful recollections and hard work on this day.”

Nella tapped a pencil on her legal pad nervously and walked down the slope where the soldiers had their weapons aimed squarely at the sleeping Infected. There was no breeze and she could clearly hear Rick Framden orating his broadcast from fifty yards away, even over the insistent buzz of the insects.

“This is it ladies and gentlemen. In just a few moments the sleeping darts should wear off and the whole world will be able to see whether the Cure has worked. This could be the beginning of the end of this terrible plague . . .”

“No pressure right?” sighed an attractive Indian girl at Nella’s elbow.

Nella grinned in spite of the situation. “Hey, aren’t you supposed to be over with the film crew?” she asked.

“Nah, the Great Rick Framden sent me to shoot b-roll. I’m not much more than an intern. And I’m stuck behind these louts. I’m barely going to get a shot of anything except uniformed backs.”

Nella liked her already. “We can’t let someone like Rick Framden dictate what gets recorded for history. No offense.”

“Believe me, none taken. Sevita Das by the way.”

“Dr. Nella Rider. Stick close to me and get ready.”

Slow movement on the field caught her eye and her smile faded. It was happening. One of the Infected was stirring. Nella looked around as a restless shuffle traveled through the soldiers. These weren’t hardened veterans. They were kids and homemakers and retirees. All that was left that could prop up a weapon. She thought to herself that they were going to be as desperate for psychiatric care as the Cured after today. If they didn’t accidentally shoot each other first. Nella pushed her way forward.

“Hey, I wouldn’t do that if I were you-” began a young soldier next to her,

but suddenly he stopped. One of the Infected, a man, began to stand, rising from the crushed whorl of long grasses. Sevita pushed in next to Nella and began filming. “Hold still!” shouted the young soldier. The Infected man held his hands up. The nails were long and jagged and his hands and cheeks were black and scaly with old blood. He was shaking.

“Identify yourself!” yelled the soldier and Nella felt him tighten like a guitar string stretched too far.

“Isaac- my name’s Isaac Green.” His voice was stronger and clearer than Nella had expected. The man caught sight of the blood on his arms and brought them in front of his face. He was shaking more now.

“Mr. Green,” Nella broke in, “Isaac. Listen to me, you’ve been ill for a long time, but it’s going to be okay now.” She took a few steps toward him and the still slumbering mass of Infected behind him.

“Don’t-” the soldier said, but Nella kept walking. Sevita followed her, camera focused on Mr. Green.

“Ill?” said Mr. Green, “Was it all a dream? Was I just delirious?” He held his hands out in front of him as if he would drop them from his body if he could. He turned around slowly, his eyes widening at the sight of hundreds of people lying motionless on the field. He turned back and sought Nella’s face. “Where is my family? I need to find them. In my dream, I- I did terrible things- I need to find my wife-” Mr. Green began to weep, his face cracking into a deep grimace.

“It’s okay, Mr. Green,” said Nella, “We’ll help you find your family just as soon as we can. If you’ll come with me we’ll have a physician check you over and then we can add your name to the Found List-” she reached him and suppressing a shudder, placed a warm hand on his back. The rag that had once been his shirt was stiff and rough like sandpaper, caked with blood and dirt. He turned suddenly toward her and she jumped slightly. The soldier called, “Steady there!” and she watched the entire line of military personnel clench their weapons tighter. Nella held up her hand. “It’s okay,” she said.

But Mr. Green was staring at her. “What do you mean the ‘Found List’?”

Nella’s response was slow and deliberate, “Mr. Green, there have been some changes in the world while you have been ill . . .” She got no further.

“Oh my God!” screamed Mr. Green, “Oh my God! It was all real! It was all real! I killed them, I killed my own babies- my neighbors, it wasn’t a dream? Tell me it was a dream!” he grabbed her arm, but weakly. He was crying so hard that she physically had to help him stay standing for a moment.

“It’s over now,” she said helplessly, “It’s going to be okay for everyone now.” But even as she said it, she knew it was a blatant lie and she blushed with shame. Mr. Green dropped her arm.

He started shaking his head, “It wasn’t a dream.” He whispered and then he started running toward the soldiers.

“Stop!” they shouted, but Mr. Green didn’t listen. He limped in an awkward sprint toward them, his ankle or foot broken some time long before. The soldiers were unused to an Infected that could speak and weep. They hesitated to fire, and Mr. Green reached the young man Nella had pushed past. Isaac threw himself on the outstretched bayonet. The soldier had tears streaming down his face as he pulled the trigger. Nella was dumbstruck. She looked at Sevita who was still filming as the soldier dropped his gun and fled up the hill. Nella heard movement behind her. She turned and saw the mass of people slowly sitting up, stretching limbs and shaking their heads as if they could clear away the memory of the past two years. She looked back at Sevita and saw the pretty Indian girl turn the camera shakily toward herself. She tried to concentrate on the Cured woman beside her who was trying to stand and heard Sevita begin her broadcast in a dreadfully calm voice.

“Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen. This is Sevita Das reporting live from the Cure facility. It has finally happened, the Cure has worked. And the Infected remember. They remember everything. The madness has cleared. As you have just seen, this will be a massive burden of guilt for the Cured to bear, and many, no doubt, will not survive. Remaining family members and friends are urged to make contact with the doctors here, who will be able to help with the intense therapy that will be necessary to repair relationships and rebuild not only the Cured, but everyone affected by this terrible disease . . .”

The Prison

Six Years Later . . .

“You’re Ms. Rider?”

The man squinted at her through thick sleet as he held the heavy glass door open for her. Nella tried not to slip as she trotted inside. She flicked cool gray slush from her leather briefcase with one hand. She suppressed a shiver, desperate to appear older and harder than she felt. The man next to her was almost unnaturally tall and she had to look almost straight up to see his face.

“You must be Mr. Courtlen.” She smiled pleasantly, then immediately felt foolish. Nella coughed lightly to cover her embarrassment and said, “And it’s *Dr.* Rider please.”

Mr. Courtlen smiled, crinkling a thick raised scar on his cheek. “Of course.

My apologies, Dr. Rider. It's nice to meet you."

Nella was surprised. "Really?" she asked before she could stop herself. Mr. Courtlen's smile was warmer, more genuine this time.

"Really," he said, "We know you're here at the judge's request, but whichever way this trial turns out, it's important that history can show all the participants were completely sane. If the judge hadn't ordered these evaluations, I would have requested them." He extended a hand toward her. Nella shook it, but felt more rough scar tissue on his palm. She fought a sympathetic wince.

"So you aren't intending to go with an insanity defense?" she asked.

"Well," he laughed, "that's not really for me to decide is it? But I don't think we'll need to." Mr. Courtlen held a hand out toward the long blue corridor. "This way please. Dr. Pazzo is expecting us."

She quickly fell a few paces behind him, no match for his lengthy stride. Nella marveled again at his height. *Imagine how fast he must have been*, she thought, *I doubt anyone could have outrun him. And then those long skinny arms would wrap around you and yank you in toward snapping teeth*. She shuddered and tried to think of something else. They had reached the metal detector and Mr. Courtlen was removing his watch and car keys.

"Where's Stan?" he asked a nervous looking soldier.

"Uh . . . He went to get coffee," the kid managed to squeak, "He'll be back in a minute." Mr. Courtlen nodded. *At least I'm not the only one scared to death of this place*, thought Nella as she watched the young guard bouncing his knee. He gripped his weapon so hard that his knuckles glinted like bone. Dr. Rider flashed him a kind smile when he glanced at her and she could see his grip relax as he responded. Mr. Courtlen waved at a middle aged officer coming toward them.

"Hey Stan," he said, "Is it any good today?"

"Hi Frank. I made it myself, still have a can or two of the good stuff kicking around. I'll be glad when someone can figure out how to grow coffee beans in the populated zone again though. There's still half a pot in the break room, help yourself." Stan passed through the detector and set two full mugs on the table. "Who is our visitor?"

Mr. Courtlen said, "This is Dr. Rider. She is the court appointed psychiatrist for both Dr. Pazzo and Miss Connelly. She'll be a regular here for the duration."

She saw Officer Kembrey raise an eyebrow at Mr. Courtlen. He obviously thought she wasn't going to last. She brushed it off. Nella stuck her hand out and Stan shook it heartily. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Stan Kembrey but everyone just calls me Stan. Terry and I will be here every day shift. If you come at night

you'll see Wanda Treim. Dr. Pazzo and Miss Connelly are the only detainees at this facility, so the rules are a little more relaxed. For now, at least, until and unless Miss Connelly becomes violent, you can bring pens or pencils into the cell to make notes with. Of course, if it were me in that cell, I think I'd rely on my memory instead. Dr. Pazzo seems to be in a calm state of mind. However, since the Cure doesn't seem to have worked as well on some of the earlier cases, there are big green buttons in the hallway in case either of them 'reverts.' Press one and all the guards will come running. If you have any questions about how things are supposed to work you can usually find the Warden in his office. If you have questions about how things *actually* work, well, Terry and I are here to serve." Officer Kembrey flashed her a smile and a wink. Mr. Courtlen rolled his eyes dramatically and walked through the detector, immediately setting it off. The younger soldier leapt forward, pointing his weapon at the lawyer. But Mr. Courtlen simply waited and Stan's only reaction was to the junior soldier's zeal.

"Relax Terry, Frank isn't going to stage a jailbreak. Just wand him. Should be near the right shoulder." He handed a gray wand to Robert who looked torn between taking it and maintaining his grip on the weapon.

"You know Frank, you should really have that taken out one of these days."

Mr. Courtlen laughed and rubbed the side of his bald head in embarrassment. "The doctor said it would be worse to take it out than leave it in for now. At least until someone starts producing antibiotics again. Besides—" he looked toward his feet, avoiding their gaze, "My wife gave me this one. Before—well, you know."

The back of Nella's neck prickled and her mind drew back, rejecting the picture that tried to grow there.

"Jesus, Frank, I'm sorry." Stan shook his head and then snapped at Terry, "Get on with it soldier! These folks have places to be."

Mr. Courtlen took off his sleek gray jacket and spread his long arms across the hall. Nella's mind flashed another picture of his hands turned into claws, long black nails ragged and stained and thin arms coated in dried black blood to his elbows. Her neck felt pinched and cold and she noticed her breathing had become rapid and shallow. *Be professional*, she thought, and forced her aching fingers to relax on the handle of her briefcase. Terry swiped the wand over Mr. Courtlen and was satisfied when it only screeched near the lawyer's shoulder. Officer Kembrey held his hand out for Nella's briefcase.

"I'll scan that for you Dr. Rider."

She handed him the case with a smile and walked through the detector. Mr. Courtlen was calmly buttoning his jacket as Terry looked nervously on. Stan handed Nella her briefcase.

“You’re all clear,” he said, “Have a nice day.”

“You too,” Nella mumbled.

Mr. Courtlen touched her shoulder and she jumped. “This way, Dr. Rider.” They walked the rest of the way down the hallway and paused before a dented metal door. The lawyer reached for a large button to be buzzed in but Nella stopped him. “Mr. Courtlen, wait,” she said, “The best way for me to get an accurate picture of the defendants’ mental health is for me to build a rapport with them first. I know you don’t have to discuss this, but if you are willing I would be grateful. Is there anything I should steer clear of during these first few sessions?”

He frowned slightly in concentration. “Well, I think you’ll find Dr. Pazzo is not what the press has made him out to be. He’s actually been remarkably patient with answering questions, and I think you’ll find him polite, if a bit on the cool side. Of course, I assume you are intelligent enough to not ask very stupid questions, like: ‘What does it taste like?’ or ‘Are you invulnerable except if you get shot in the head?’ And for the love of all things sacred, don’t call him a zombie.” Mr. Courtlen threw up his arms and then gave her a conspiratorial smile. He pressed the buzzer.

“And Miss Connelly?”

Nella watched the smile drop from his face. “I’m- I’m not Miss Connelly’s counsel. I don’t think I could really say.”

“Of course,” said Nella as the dented door swung open. She managed a bright smile at him as she stepped toward the door. Mr. Courtlen held it open but gently caught her wrist to stop her. Nella flinched as the rigid bones of his hand closed around her. He ignored her revulsion.

“But what Stan said about pens? I think I would trust him if it were me. Just to be safe.” He let her go and straightened his jacket but the color was high in his face.

“Thanks,” she said, though he had only made her more nervous. Mr. Courtlen cleared his throat.

“Dr. Pazzo is in the common room, if you’ll follow me.” He appeared unruffled as he strode through the door that separated the world from its most notorious living villain.

Meeting Robert Pazzo

Nella recognized Dr. Pazzo’s face from the case files and the television news, but only barely. She’d been shown the pictures that were available and they were of a doctor still fresh from grad school. He had looked young, slightly

bewildered, but happy and eager. She hated to admit it, but his picture had even been *attractive*. She tried to equate it with the man in coveralls standing near the plastic table in the most secure prison on earth. *It has been eight years since the Cure and probably ten since the photo was taken*, Nella thought to herself. Still, this man looked closer to the father of the boy in the pictures. Unlike the other Infected he had no visible scars, since he had secluded himself before the madness overcame him. But the other signs were there. He was underweight even all these years later and his hair was bright white and thinning in places. His shoulders curled around him like a dried rind. His face though, his face held the most marked changes. His eyes had sunk into his skull as if they were too ashamed to look upon the world. His cheeks and chin were jagged peaks that closed off any expression in their tight shadows. Nella glanced back at Mr. Courtlen. She had thought him too lean for his height and that his bald head made him look sickly, but compared to Dr. Pazzo, the lawyer was a model of health and vigor.

Mr. Courtlen saw her glance at him and noticed her shock. He stepped quickly toward her and touched the back of her elbow to steady her. “Dr. Pazzo, this is Dr. Rider, the court appointed psychiatrist. She’ll be evaluating you and Miss Connelly throughout the trial. This is not a private relationship, so it isn’t privileged. This means anything you say-”

“Yes, yes, Frank, I know. We don’t have anything to hide. Dr. Rider, a pleasure to meet you.” He offered her a hand that was little more than a rake with a thin covering of skin. Nella took it, intending to be gentle, but his grip was surprisingly strong. “Please, have a seat,” he said, indicating the plastic picnic table. Mr. Courtlen sat beside him. Nella chose to sit on the opposite side, facing them. She placed her briefcase on the seat next to her.

“I just want to clarify what I’m here for. Judge Hawkins has asked me to monitor you and Miss Connelly to insure that you are competent to stand trial and that you remain so during the trial. It’s important, no matter the verdict, that you are a healthy and active member of your defense and that this tribunal gets a reliable version of the events which caused the December Pandemic. Do you understand?”

Dr. Pazzo looked amused. He leaned back slightly and crossed his arms. “Well, aren’t you the perfect reincarnation of Gustave Gilbert?”

Nella smiled, but it never reached her eyes. “I don’t think the world is going to fall for another Albert Speer, Dr. Pazzo.”

Mr. Courtlen frowned at the reference, his scar stretching and blanching. Nella felt a pang of remorse for having said it. Dr. Pazzo just laughed.

“I think I’m going to like you,” he said, “But I have a few rules myself, if

you want full access to me.”

Nella straightened her posture and stared intently at him.

“Relax doctor. They’re nothing unexpected. First, my lawyer, Mr. Courtlen must be present during our interactions. If he isn’t here, our conversations will be limited to the current state of the weather. Second, I will answer any question you have *and* I will answer them truthfully,” said Dr. Pazzo with a beatific smile, “But you need to make sure you have recording equipment or are taking notes,” his voice began to become strident, “My answers will not change with repetition. So don’t ask me over and over and over.” Dr. Pazzo was shouting at her and had risen from his seat. His cuffed hands were two balls of shaking bone. Mr. Courtlen looked alarmed and helped his client sit back down as the guards moved nervously closer around them. Nella remained calm and motionless. “I understand,” she said as Dr. Pazzo rearranged himself and softly cleared his throat. He smiled again.

“Very good doctor, very good indeed. Third, we will get to all of your questions. We’re probably going to become very tired of each other. We have time. So if I say we are done for the day, I don’t want to hear any whining or see any fits. You’ll get your answers, just be patient. As unpleasant as these visits will be for you, I guarantee they will be ten times more unpleasant for me. But I’ve resolved to do this.” Dr. Pazzo was serious and quiet. Nella sensed that she was now seeing the real man that Dr. Pazzo was. The one that had destroyed the world. And then lived to regret it.

“Very well, Dr. Pazzo,” she said, “Is there anything else?”

He straightened his shoulders and looked up at her brightly. “Well, not as a requirement, but maybe a favor? I’d really love some books.”

Nella shot a confused look at Mr. Courtlen but his face was impassive. “They won’t let you have books?” she asked, surprised.

“I’m allowed to have them, but I don’t exactly have people racing to the library to borrow books for me.” Dr. Pazzo tapped his foot restlessly. “Look, you may have already decided that you don’t like me. Hell, I think even Mr. Courtlen doesn’t like me and I’m *paying* for his company. But right now, and for the foreseeable future- probably until my death, you are the only two who are willing to talk to me. And that makes you the closest thing I have to friends.

If you want me to stay sane enough to be tried, I need to do something besides pace my tiny cell. A few more weeks of this and I’ll be as mad as poor old Ann next door. I’ve already been mad once in this lifetime. I have no wish to do that again.”

Nella pulled a notepad and pen from her briefcase. “What kind of books do you like?” she asked. Dr. Pazzo gave her a list of a few dozen books, pretty

evenly mixed between novels and scientific journals, but nothing jumped out as suspicious or even as a reliable pattern of tastes to Nella. She looked up from her list just in time to see Dr. Pazzo discreetly nod at Mr. Courtlen. The lawyer looked uncomfortable, his scar pulsing an ugly dark brown across his cheek.

“What is it? What did I miss?” she asked sharply.

Dr. Pazzo gave her a slow, sly smile that she didn’t much care for. I’m sure they didn’t tell you in court, but you are the fifth psychiatrist to enjoy my hospitality,” he said, the smile still growing in his skull face. Nella felt the painful prick of her neck hair again. “I had to refuse to speak to them. They were more interested in maintaining their power by denying simple requests than in discovering the truth. I was just indicating to Mr. Courtlen that we can work with you. Oh yes, I think you’ll do nicely. It’s a good thing too, I was beginning to wonder if they’d find someone suitable before time ran out.”

She saw Mr. Courtlen start and glance quickly at his client. Nella knit her brows and slightly shook her head. “Before time runs out for *what*?” she asked.

Still smiling, Dr. Pazzo rose and backed away from the plastic table. “That’s enough for today, I think. I’ll see you both tomorrow.” And he walked back to his cell leaving Mr. Courtlen and Dr. Rider still sitting in shock.

Patient Zero

Nella coolly placed the booklist and pen back in the briefcase. “What did he mean by that?” wondered Mr. Courtlen aloud. Nella snapped the case latch closed. She stood, smoothing wrinkles from her lap.

“If he hasn’t told you,” she said, “I wouldn’t worry about it. This is just narcissistic posturing, the same as his rules. Dr. Pazzo knows that we have more power than he does right now and it irritates him. He is simply trying to find a way to gain the upper hand by pretending to magically have information that no one could possibly have found in eight long years. There is no such information. Hundreds of investigators have meticulously examined that lab and his home.”

Mr. Courtlen shook his head. “Doctor, my client may seem arrogant and controlling right now, but I assure you, he is not truly that way. This is something more.”

“I know this is my first meeting with Dr. Pazzo, but it is also the first time he has had to engage with someone who has more power than he does. No offense, but up to this point, he’s seen you as his employee, his subordinate. This may have been the first time that he realized that you and I can truly influence his fate and that he doesn’t have any real control over either of us. This is just an attempt to manipulate us, to ‘indebt’ us if you will, by waving this secret in front

of us and hoping we'll jump."

Mr. Courtlen still looked troubled. Nella sighed. "Look, if you really want to know what he seems to think is so important, take my advice and don't ask him anything about it. If you do, he'll just keep stringing you along. If you wait, he'll become desperate and tell you quickly in hopes of bargaining."

Nella walked toward the soldier at the end of the room. "I'd like to visit Ann Connelly, could you show me the way?" she asked.

"Of course," said the soldier and led the way down a narrow hall lined with small solitary cells. "We'd sure appreciate your help, Doc," the soldier said casually, "See, we don't want to keep her locked in a tiny, windowless cell, not when there is all this room to roam around in." He waved his hand back toward the large community room. "And considering what's likely to happen at the end of the trial- well, begging your pardon, Doc, but we can't really begrudge her what freedom she has left can we? It's just not human, you see. And some of us ... well, some of us just got back to *being* human after all." The soldier blushed deeply and rubbed the back of his neck. Nella touched his elbow.

"Your compassion does you credit. And it's a rare thing to find even these days."

The soldier cleared his throat. They had reached the cell and a female soldier was watching the tiny slot of glass in the door.

"Well, you see Doc, we're afraid she'll hurt herself if we let her out. She chews everything--"

"Pica," said the female guard.

"Yeah, like Johnson says, she's got pica. And she shakes and trips a lot. She's not like any other zom- I mean Cured, I've ever seen."

Officer Johnson stepped away from the window for a moment. "The doctor says it's because she got a concentrated dose of the early prototype. Her brain is like swiss cheese now. The Cure won't help her."

"The kicker is that she did it on *purpose*," the male officer said, shaking his head, "Some sort of high pressure internship. Thought the bacteria would give her enough endorphins and adrenaline to stay up through exams. She did it without telling the others until it was too late."

Johnson spat. "Then that bastard Pazzo locked her in with the dead animals. I don't know how she survived as long as she did."

"They say you're the best at helping folks who didn't get all the way Cured. What do you think Doc, is there a way we can fix it so we can let her out for some exercise once in a while?"

Nella puffed out her cheeks in a slow breath. "I'm not sure," she said at last, "I'll have to examine her. But if there is permanent physical damage I'm

afraid there's not much that *anyone* can do. Does she have a regular physician?"

"Sure," said Johnson, "But he basically just changes the bandages anywhere she's bitten herself and tells us to keep her clean. I think he's scared of her, he always leaves in a hurry."

"Well," said Nella, "I should probably get in there. Do you mind if I leave my briefcase here?"

"That's probably for the best."

Nella set the case down. Johnson held out a bag of carrots. "For the pica," she said, "just give them to her one at a time. It takes her a little while to get through them. Otherwise she'll try to bite you. But she can't help it." Dr. Rider took the bag of carrots and the pair of rubber gloves Johnson held out next. "She's no longer got the disease of course, but human bites can cause nasty infections, so you might want these just in case."

"Thanks," said Nella, snapping them on.

"She's really quite docile," said Johnson, "but Wells and I will be watching the whole time, so things won't get out of control."

"I appreciate that," said Nella. She took a deep breath with her hand on the door and prepared to meet patient zero in the greatest plague that ever befell mankind.

The room was lit erratically by a dull florescent bulb, its mate long burnt out and the drop-in shade littered with insect carcasses. Nella noticed the room itself was clean and utterly free of both furniture and debris. All the surfaces were padded and covered with vinyl, but they were blank, an endless cube of dull green.

Ann Connelly was wandering the edge of the room, her arms in a permanent self embrace inside a blindingly white straitjacket. Someone was taking care of her. Her face was clean and the little cuts she had somehow managed to inflict upon herself were freshly bandaged. Someone had taken the time to brush her hair and fix it securely so that it would not hang in her eyes. Still, with one glance at her stumbling movement and her constantly snapping teeth, Dr. Rider knew that there was something wrong. Ann's eyes slid over everything alike, not stopping even when Nella held out a carrot. However brilliant Ann Connelly had been before, might still be in some deep place, she offered no sign of it now. She kept wandering the perimeter, stumbling every now and then, though there was nothing to trip on.

"Miss Connelly," said Nella.

The prisoner stopped walking but didn't turn her head toward Nella. "Ann, I'm Dr. Rider. I'm just here to talk with you."

Ann started fighting the straitjacket. Her arms whipped up and down, giant

worms writhing around the woman's thin chest.

"The teeth must gnash," mumbled Ann.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" asked Nella.

"The teeth must GNASH," Ann's voice was hoarse and toneless, a quality Nella recognized. When she had helped in administering the Cure, she had known many of the Infected to wake up from the drugged sleep screaming. Some of them took hours to stop. Some of them never did, their voice boxes losing the music that had once flowed through them.

"THE TEETH MUST GNASH!" Ann turned toward Nella and her jaw clicked together with a snap.

"THE TEETH MUST GNASH!" Ann lurched toward Dr. Rider, stumbling as if pushed from behind. She continued to shout in her broken voice, "THE TEETH MUST GNASH!"

"Okay, Ann, okay. Here-" Nella guided a carrot between Ann's rapidly clicking teeth. Ann chewed it immediately but began to choke. Johnson opened the door and calmly walked up to Ann. She untied the straitjacket releasing Ann's arms. "We only keep her in this so she won't chew her hands or claw at her face anymore. She'll be okay as long as you are giving her the carrots."

"Is she ever sedated?"

"She has to be to sleep, otherwise she just wanders all night until she collapses. But Mr. Grant, her lawyer, said he doesn't want her drugged for the trial, so we only administer a very small dose of sedative at night."

"Thanks," said Nella as Johnson left the cell. Ann was holding the carrot with hands so thickly bandaged that they were no more articulated than wool mittens.

"Ann, do you know why you are in here?"

"Because the teeth must gnash. Because Dr. Schneider made all the teeth gnash. But I didn't know! I only wanted to feel better. I didn't know the teeth would want more!" Ann became frantic, smashing her hands into her face. Nella gently held Ann's hands for a moment and then handed her another carrot. She tried not to think of how similar the crunch of bone and the damp snap, snap, snap of the carrot between Ann's tireless teeth sounded.

"Can you tell me what happened? Do you remember how this started?"

Ann's teeth stopped. "So tired, so tired. But the eyes must see, they cannot close. They can *never* close! Dr. Schneider says so, she says to stay and to see. Always the eyes must see."

Ann paused to chew on the carrot and Nella winced without meaning to. "But then, they are so heavy, the eyes. Like glass marbles, rolling and rolling and scratching. They ache to close and Ann has mist inside her head. So Dr.

Schneider gives her a key. It's the special key for the beast door. Dr. Schneider tells her the beast room will turn her eyes to flesh again. Her eyes will see without closing and the mist will drain from Ann's head, but only if Ann stays in the beast room. Only if Ann breathes what the beasts breathe. So Ann goes into the beast room many times. And she makes the teeth that gnash. She makes them everywhere but does not know. No, not even when they fill her own mouth." Ann stuck her bandaged hand between her teeth and before Nella could jump up to stop her, Ann's jaws snapped around it. Ann's eyes streamed with tears as her mouth ground down upon the thick pads of gauze near her fingertips. Nella gently pulled Ann's hand away from her mouth and replaced it with another carrot.

"Okay Ann, okay. We don't have to talk more about it today."

Nella checked Ann's hand and rebandaged it. Ann became calm again, her gaze again like oil, sliding over the room and Dr. Rider without pause. Nella gently replaced the arms of the straitjacket but Ann didn't even seem to notice.

"Goodbye Ann. I'll come and see you again soon. Maybe we can get you out of this room for a while. Would you like that?"

But Ann just resumed her restless stumbling around the perimeter of the cell. She didn't even turn her head to look at the doctor. Nella left the cell profoundly depressed.

Sevita

Nella made her way back toward the entrance of the prison. She felt drained and uneasy, as if she'd forgotten something important or as if she had exhausted every possibility to an unsolvable problem. She groaned inwardly when she reached the heavy glass doors and saw that the sleet had changed over to snow and was already thick on the pavement. Nella hated this in between time of year. As if the old wheezing world couldn't decide whether to finally die or rally itself for one more spring.

She pushed open the door and slipped into the slimy, chilled evening. Her car was the only one in visitor parking. It wasn't unusual. Most people were used to being alone now. Gas was reserved for critical purposes at least until the Farm could produce enough ethanol or the Cure spread far enough south to recover countries with oil fields. Nella doubted either would happen in her lifetime. Only the counsel for the defendants and herself would have vehicles here. The loneliness seeped in everywhere these days, part of the atmosphere and only rarely noticeable. Now, with the small circles of streetlight hovering over her and the extra silence of the snow, she felt it again, like a sudden stumble on a

forgotten stair. Nella walked toward her car and suddenly realized that the vehicle had been cleared of snow. She smiled and looked around as if her helper would suddenly pop out. She drove home feeling a little better about the world.

Her good mood lasted until she saw the envelope from the Department of Human Reproductive Services in her mail box. Nella swore under her breath, but didn't bother to open it. Instead, she dropped it on her kitchen table and went to call Sevita.

The two had remained together after the first administration of the Cure. Sevita had been offered a position on the World News Broadcast as soon as her report with Dr. Rider had been aired, but she had refused the job. Sevita was drawn to the stories of the Cured as they looked for relatives or tried to come to terms with the violence they remembered committing. She documented the work of Nella's team for six years as they pushed farther and farther into the infection zones along with the military. As a result, both women had become best friends. Sevita had been selected to document the Plague Trial just months before Judge Hawkins had appointed Nella the chief psychiatric adviser.

The phone only rang for a second before Sevita answered.

"Guess what I got in the mail today?" said Nella, before they had even exchanged greetings.

"You too huh? Seems our friendly neighborhood matchmakers have been busy. Our entire unit got them today."

"What are you going to do? Have you told Chris yet?"

Sevita sighed. "Yeah, she knows. She's excited. I think she sees it as the final blow in the marriage argument. She doesn't know I was going to ask her after the trial anyway."

"Sure you were."

"I was! I just wanted to have all this behind us. I don't want to remember the year our baby was born as the year the first public executions took place."

"You don't know that's what will happen."

"Come on Nella, I know *you* aren't that naive. Whether this Dr. Pazzo and his assistant are guilty or not doesn't really make much difference, does it? They were *there*. The survivors of the Plague think they've seen the worst. But you and I, we're the ones who know how much damage has really been done. You've talked with the Cured, been with them from the moment they realized the weight of what they had done. You know the suicide rates. You were the one that compiled the report. Once all that comes out in court, the world is not going to be able to let go. Maybe just being there is close enough to guilty."

"Then what's the point of even having the trial Sevita? Why didn't the military just shoot them when they found them? They wouldn't have bothered

appointing you to document it if we weren't going to try to have real justice."

"We're just pretenses, you and I, to make it *seem* like a fair trial. Whatever you find, the trial will still move forward. Whatever I record will be rewritten. And Pazzo and Connelly will burn. I just hope for our sakes that they really are guilty."

Nella was quiet. "I don't want to talk about it anymore," she said at last.

"Neither do I. There's nothing you or I can do to change it. So come over for dinner. We'll talk about baby clothes and nursery designs with Christine. She'll be ecstatic. She brought home a case of beer from her last scav mission as part of her pay."

"Mmm eight year old beer."

Sevita laughed. "We have to drink it tonight, she wants to have the fertilization done this week."

"You aren't going to adopt an orphan?"

"No, Christine is set on the pregnancy. She says we all have a 'genetic responsibility' now. I think she's been reading too many DHRS pamphlets. But this is what she wants. And you know I can never resist it when she sets her heart on something. Come on, come over. I know you'll fall asleep over your notes without eating if you don't. No trial talk, I promise."

"Okay," said Nella, grinning, "I'll be over in a few."

Sevita and Christine had met during the worst part of the Plague, long before either knew Nella. Christine had been an EMT when the outbreak began. She found out quickly that she was immune to the December Plague, though her partner was not so lucky. So Christine drove her ambulance alone, ferrying the Infected to local hospitals until the military took over management and burned them all to the ground. After that, Christine ran a mobile triage out of her ambulance for those who had been bitten or injured. The world quickly emptied of sanity and Christine had to routinely defend herself both from Infected and desperate people. But she never thought about quitting. She kept her radio on at every hour and kept her ambulance clean, running and well-stocked when she had time. The military tolerated her, even supplied her with fuel and medical supplies but warned her that she was on her own. And that was just fine with Christine. But when she heard repeated distress calls from Sevita's office, she followed a military unit in to help. The entire building had been surrounded by Infected. But because it was one of the few remaining stations still capable of broadcasting, the military decided it was a worthwhile target to retake. It was a massacre. When they finally escaped, the building was overrun and most of the military unit had been eaten alive. Only four people remained, huddled in Christine's ambulance as they sped away. Sevita was one of them.

Sevita had been wounded in several places trying to defend her coworkers. Christine had stopped driving her ambulance in order to care for the dying girl and eventually nursed her back to health. But Sevita clung to Chris long after she had healed, uncharacteristically afraid of the strange city and mistrusting of its thinly manned safety barriers. Nella never understood how two such opposite people could be so madly in love with each other, but there it was. They'd been inseparable as long as she had known them- since Sevita's arrival in the City. Though Sevita regained her bold, friendly nature, neither she nor Christine ever felt the need to look any farther for their happiness.

Most of the remaining humans had kept to themselves after the Cure. Everyone had witnessed or participated in the death of almost every person that they knew. Even eight years after the Plague, almost no one had any real urge to build new ties. Especially after the old ones had been so brutally broken. In the beginning, people had avoided each other as much as possible for their own safety. Now though, it had become habit. Love like Sevita and Chris had just didn't happen anymore. Because of her work, Nella had more contact with other people than was the norm. But Nella didn't have many friends, or even very many colleagues. Sevita and Chris were her new family and she spent almost every evening walking to or from their small apartment.

Warm and slightly buzzed on skunky beer, Nella listened with her eyes half closed as the couple had the same good natured argument that they had for years.

"You have a fear of commitment. Tell her Nella."

Sevita scowled. "No I don't. You are just having a reaction to the disaster around us. It's natural. People after the Black Death bred like rabbits. And again after the last world war. I just want to make sure this isn't some short term shack up. You'll get cold feet in six months, I know it."

Chris smacked Sevita lightly on the knee. "It's been eight years!"

Nella snorted and almost dropped her beer.

"What are you laughing at?" grumbled Sevita, "You're supposed to be on my side. You should be telling Christine that she's just bowing to peer pressure and she should strive to make up her own mind."

"Oh no," laughed Nella, "I know better than to get in the middle of this mess. I'm going to get dessert while you two duke it out." She winked at Sevita and went into the tiny kitchen. Nella pulled out Sevita's enamel canister. It still smelled warm and sweet like the tea it had held so long ago. Now it was the temporary home for Christine's engagement ring. Nella had known it was there for years, a warm sparking star waiting for Sevita to grow some courage. Nella smiled. She remembered the day Sevita had bought it. The two of them had stood in front of the scavenger's shop window and debated for hours. Nella

placed it on the plate next to Christine's apple crisp. She sighed. It should have been chocolate cake and champagne, not fruit jumble and stale beer. But Nella had checked, both had been far, far out of reach. She wondered if any of them would ever taste chocolate again. It didn't matter, of course, she decided. She looked around the tiny kitchen, its warm yellow paint and cluttered cupboards peeking through pictures and tiny glittering ornaments that Christine collected like a magpie. This place pushed out the empty world. How much this little home would change in the next year! Nella could almost forgive the DHRS for forcing people into parenthood if it could put the world back together like this.

"Garcon!" called Sevita, laughing.

"Oh! Coming!" yelled Nella, picking up the dessert tray.

A Maintenance Man for the End of the World

Nella arrived at the prison early the next morning. The happiness of her friends still sat like a warm stone in her chest and she barely even noticed the clammy drizzle. She pulled into visitor parking and noticed Mr. Courtlen arguing with a short, portly, middle aged man. Nella got out of the car but paused in the open doorway when she heard their raised voices.

"Your client is a *monster* Frank!" shouted the older man, "He locked her in a room full of infected animals and abandoned her for months."

"She was already infected! What should he have done?" Mr. Courtlen's long arms were stretched toward the other man, almost pleading.

"I can't believe you are going to blame this all on Ann. She was an overworked, practically abused intern that was then exposed to a vile plague that *your* client cooked up." The fat little man was jabbing a finger toward Mr. Courtlen's face. "And you have the gall to try to weasel out of this by pointing to *her*?"

"No, that's not what-"

"Listen Frank," the little man talked over Mr. Courtlen, "I know you are court appointed to defend Robert Pazzo but how could you live with yourself if you destroy an innocent person? She's already incapable of ever leading a normal life because of what your client did. If you make a deal with the prosecutors claiming that Ann was responsible, she'll be completely at the mercy of the court. She can't even coherently defend herself. Can you live with yourself knowing that?" The little man walked a step past Mr. Courtlen.

"But we're not-"

The lawyer spun around and interrupted him again. "Oh, that's right. I forgot who I was dealing with. You're already comfortable destroying a

defenseless woman.” The little man sneered and Nella thought Mr. Courtlen would hit him. But Frank’s shoulders sagged and he leaned his back against his car as if he were the one who had been punched. She watched the older lawyer trot into the prison and though she didn’t even know his name and she knew she was supposed to be a neutral party, in that moment Nella truly hated the nasty, strident little man.

She was utterly still, not knowing whether to pretend she had seen nothing or check to see if Frank were okay. He put a hand to his forehead but didn’t move. Nella closed her car door and watched him start. He hadn’t even seen her drive in. He turned around and his face was dark red. The ragged scar on his cheek pulsed purple. Nella thought he was angry but he managed a small, tight smile and she realized he was only surprised and embarrassed.

“Good morning, Dr. Rider,” he said, and his voice was smooth and calm.

“Are you okay?” she asked, circling her car towards him. He rubbed the back of his neck and his smile loosened and grew.

“I’m fine. It’s not like I’ve never been called a monster before. I’ve even called myself worse on occasion. Mr. Grant just doesn’t understand that we’re not practicing law from Before. He wants things to work the same as they used to. He thinks that the world just has this out of order sign temporarily tacked to it. Any minute a maintenance guy is going to come along and plug the world back in and everything will go back to what it was.”

Nella sighed. “I doubt he’s the only one that thinks that.”

“He can’t believe that this trial is about anything other than getting his client released. He thinks that’s my goal too. Mr. Grant is expecting me to make some kind of deal with the prosecution by sacrificing Ann Connelly in return for a lighter sentence for Dr. Pazzo.”

Mr. Courtlen walked to his trunk and waved his keys as he talked. “I’m not stupid,” he said, “I know my client is never going to walk out of here. Hell, I probably won’t even be able to stall his execution. But that was never the point of all this.”

Nella heard Seviata’s words echo in her head as he disappeared behind the opening trunk lid.

“What is your goal Mr. Courtlen?” she asked.

He slammed the trunk. “Well, it’s to help my client to have his say and to find out about what really happened. Dr. Pazzo has promised to tell the world the truth. So I have promised to defend him as well as I could. We both understand that he is not likely to escape this.”

“And you believe him?” Nella kept her voice neutral.

Frank opened a black umbrella and walked up to her. “Please,” he said,

holding it out for her, "It's cold out here."

Instead of reaching for it, Nella stepped underneath the umbrella with him. He smelled almost impossibly clean, like fresh shaving foam and wind dried linen. Nella was dismayed to realize that she had expected him to smell like the other Infected she had met during the Cure. They had been putrid and coppery with rotten meat and dried blood. She tried to put the memory from her head and scolded herself for her prejudice.

"Yes, I believe he's going to tell the truth," continued Frank, "I also believe he's guilty of at least *helping* to start this whole thing, because he admits it, as you will see. But everyone deserves to say their piece. Mr. Grant has this delusion that because I was Infected I have some affinity for Robert Pazzo. But I have more reason to hate my client than many." He watched her face as he spoke, "The things I've done, what I have lost- what we *all* have lost because of this terrible plague. How could I be his friend?"

He shook his head as if to clear it. "I'm sorry. It's cold and wet and I've kept you here complaining about unimportant things." He touched her elbow and this time she didn't shudder. "We should go in," he said.

"I think it *is* important," replied Nella as they walked toward the prison, "How can you defend him if you are convinced he is guilty?"

Mr. Courtlen laughed. "I'm hardly the first lawyer to ever believe his client is guilty."

"No, I suppose not. But if you hold him responsible for all of your loss-"

"Who is left in the world who doesn't hold him responsible for their losses? Besides, it's far, far more complicated than it seems. I believe he plans to start telling you the story today."

They reached the heavy glass door and Nella held it open for him as he shook the chill out of the umbrella.

"We didn't expect you this early though," he said.

"I was told that this was the best time to speak with Miss Connelly's council." Nella felt guilty saying it, but pushed the feeling aside.

"Ah, I see," said Mr. Courtlen with a small smile, "Well, I'll see you later this morning then."

"Will ten o'clock be alright?"

"I think that will be fine. I'll see you then, Dr. Rider."

And because he still seemed shrunken somehow, still red with embarrassment, she added, "I look forward to it."

His smile warmed and he stood a little straighter. Nella walked down the hall to the metal detector without looking back at him.

The Teeth Must Gnash

Mr. Grant was pacing the hall in front of Ann Connelly's cell. When he saw Nella, a grin split his round face so quickly that Nella felt queasy. He quickly smothered the grin, but Nella was too distracted by the dull thuds coming from Ann's cell to notice.

She opened the cell door and saw Ann much changed from what she had been the day before. Wells was trying to hold her back from flinging herself into the walls and Johnson was speaking calmly to her and holding a gloved hand between the prisoner's head and the wall as Ann whipped back and forth in frantic wriggles. Both guards looked exhausted.

"What has happened?" asked Nella.

"Oh, thank goodness, Doc," sighed Wells, "We didn't think anyone was coming to help."

Nella gently but firmly held Ann's chin so she could make an examination of her. "How long has she been like this?"

"Well, she started doing this sometime overnight. The night shift said she seemed to be building up to it all evening." Johnson ran a soothing hand over Ann's hair, trying to smooth it back into place. Ann had slammed herself against the padded wall hard enough to bruise her left cheek and her lip had been bitten until it bled. Ann's eyes skittered and leapt over everything.

"Has her physician been called? Did he prescribe a sedative at all?"

Mr. Grant trotted into the doorway as Nella asked. She looked up from Ann's face in time to see Wells and Johnson exchange a disgusted glance at the lawyer's entrance.

"The doctor says he can't do anything for her since we've all been told she is not to have sedatives during the trial," Johnson mumbled.

"Did her physician order that?" Nella knew it was the lawyer that had told them not to sedate Ann, but she wanted to make a point.

"No, Dr. Rider, it was me. I need Ann to be aware and able to assist in her own defense," a slow oily smile oozed over Mr. Grant's face, "Unless, of course, you determine that she is incapable of doing that."

"With all due respect, Mr. Grant, you are not a physician," Ann whipped her head forward and Nella struggled to keep her from smacking her forehead on the wall, "Regardless of what I find, Miss Connelly cannot continue to live with these kinds of episodes without relief. Being in a state of such extreme anxiety isn't helping her *or* your defense case."

"How am I supposed to put together a defense with a catatonic doll?"

Nella tried to control her anger, but her voice was louder than she meant it