

DONT WAIT, EXFOLIATE

Perry sat slumped on his couch, a Newcastle Brown Ale in one hand and the remote control in the other. He flipped through the channels without really seeing the programs.

Hed known the blue and green plaid couch since hed been a kid, when his dad brought it home from the Salvation Army as a surprise for his mom. At the time the couch was in pretty good shape for a hand-me-down, but that was some fifteen years ago. After his mother died, the couch and the dishes and silverware, none of which matched was all hed taken from the old house. As far as he knew, the house was still sitting on that dirt road in Cheboygan, crumbling into nothingness. During Perrys childhood, Dads repetitive handyman-special repairs were the only thing that kept the place standing. Perry knew that no one else would ever want the ramshackle house; it was either rotting away or already bulldozed under.

Hed had the couch for several years, first at college, then in his apartment. After that long it fit the contours of his big body as if it were custom-made for him. But even the couch, a beer and the remote control couldnt remove the blackness that had followed him home from work. Hed been sent home early. Sent home, for crying out loud, like some undisciplined, lazy worker. That alone would have been enough to crush his spirit, but the Magnificent Seven simply refused to subside.

And they didnt just itch anymore. They hurt.

It wasnt just the thick, crusty scabs that throbbed incessantly. There was something else, something that ran deep. Something in his body told him that things were spiraling out of hand.

Perry had always wondered if cancer patients knew something was horribly wrong. Sure, people always acted surprised when the doctor gave them that x-amount-of-time-to-live shit, and some of them probably were a little surprised, but a lot of people suffer pain that they know isnt natural. Like his dad.

His dad had known. Although he never said a word to anyone, he grew even quieter, even more serious and even more angry. Yeah, although

Perry didnt put the pieces together until his father entered the hospital, the old man had known.

And now Perry knew. He had a weird feeling in his stomach. Not an instinct or intuition or anything like that but a feathery, queasy feeling. For the first time since the rashes had flared up on Monday morning, Perry wondered if it might be something . . . fatal.

He stood and walked to the bathroom. Removing his shirt, he stared at his once-buff body. Obviously, the lack of sleep caused by his condition -it was a condition now, because of the feeling that something was really wrong- was getting to him. He looked pathetic. He always rubbed his head when he became nervous, and his hair stuck up wildly in all directions. His skin appeared paler than normal, even for a German boy trudging through a Michigan winter. The darkness under his eyes was pronouncedly unattractive.

He looked . . . sick.

Another detail caught his eye, although he wondered if it was his imagination. His muscles seemed slightly more defined. He slowly rotated his arm, watching the deltoid flutter beneath his fatty skin. Was he more cut than before? Perry unbuttoned his pants and kicked them into the corner. He opened the medicine cabinet and grabbed the tweezers, then sat on the toilet. The cold seat made goose bumps run up and down his flesh.

He gave the tweezers a flick with his finger. They vibrated with a soft tuning-fork hum.

The rash on his left thigh was the easiest one to get at. Hed done a lot of damage to it, both from intentional scratching and his unconscious attack during the previous night. Scabs, both crusty-old and newly red, caked the three-inch-diameter rash. Seemed like as good a spot as any to get rolling.

He pinched the area around the scab-encrusted rash with his right forefinger and thumb, making it bulge out a little. Part of the scabs edge had begun to peel naturally. He started picking with the tweezers, pinched them down on a flake of scab and gently pulled. The scab lifted, but stayed firmly affixed to the skin.

Perry leaned forward, eyes narrowing with determination and intensity. It would hurt like the proverbial bitch, but he was getting that thing off his body. He squeezed the tweezers harder and yanked. The thick scab finally gave, accompanied by a flash of pain; it came free with the tiniest of tearing sounds.

He set the tweezers down on the counter, then pulled off a strip of toilet paper. He dabbed at the bleeding, open sore. After a few seconds, the bleeding stopped. The exposed skin underneath didnt look right. It should have had that wet look, that shiny look, like skin-in-progress or something. This looked different.

Too different.

The flesh looked like an orange peel, not only in color but in texture as well. It smelled faintly of wet leaves. Tiny tears oozed watery blood.

A chill of stabbing panic knifed through his body. If this had happened to his leg, had it also happened to...?

He reached down to his testicles and slowly lifted them to get a good look, hoping to God they would look normal.

In effect, God told Perry to piss off.

It was the scariest thing hed ever seen. Pale orange skin covered the left side of his scrotum. The area was mostly bald; only a few curly pubic hairs remained.

Hed been nervous up till now, even heading into the wonderful world of pure dread, but these were his balls. His balls, for crying out loud! He sat, frozen, the toilet seat refusing to warm up, the drip under the sink suddenly so loud he

wondered in amazement how hed ever managed to sleep in the tiny apartment. His mouth felt paper dry. He heard himself breathing. Everything seemed so quiet. Perry fought to control the panic dancing back and forth through his mind; he tried to rationalize the situation.

It was just a strange rash, thats all. Hed go to the doctor and get it cleared up. Might take a shot or two, but it probably wouldnt be worse than the gonorrhea and syphilis tests hed had in college.

Gathering his courage, he let his fingers explore the area. It felt firm and unnatural. This wasnt something a shot of penicillin could clear up, because it wasnt just on the surface. He felt something inside his scrotum, something that had never been there before, something just under the thick orange skin.

A coppery chill hit Perry as he realized, suddenly and with perfect clarity, that he was going to die. Whatever this shit was, it was going to kill him, slowly, as it grew into his sac and up into his dick. A terror sat inside him now, growing just as surely as the Magnificent Seven grew, creating a dark, cold, shaky vibration in his soul.

Breathe, he told himself. Just breathe. Control yourself. Discipline. He forced himself to let go of the nasty, growing, firm lump and the thick orange skin. That peculiar mental fuzziness overtook him again, and he stared at the wall with a blank expression.

Without conscious thought, he clutched the tweezers and viciously jabbed them into the side of his thigh. The needle-like points slid effortlessly into the skin and poked out through the top of the scab-wound. Perry screamed in pain; his mind cleared he realized both what he was doing and what he had to do.

He ripped the tweezers free. Bright red blood streaks flew in all directions, landing on his linoleum floor like tiny threads, as did thin wet strands of a much darker red, so dark it looked . . . purple.

Blood -and purple- trickled down his leg. He set the tweezers on the counter and yanked free a rolling wad of toilet paper, which he pressed firmly into the wound. The paper turned bright red. The bleeding quickly subsided.

Perry gently lifted the wad of bloody paper. The stabbing tweezers had ripped through the orangish skin, leaving a thick, torn piece sticking up from the center.

This thing had to go, and it had to go right motherfucking now. Play through the pain.

He fastened the tweezers around the flap of orange skin, squeezed tightly, and yanked as hard as he could. Ripping, clawing pain shot through his leg, but he smiled with satisfaction as the orange flesh tore free. More blood spilled to the floor.

He held the piece of flesh up to the light. It was thick, thick like the skin on one of those fat Sunkists, the kind that are as large as grapefruit. Thin white tendrils stuck out from the sides like a thousand minute jellyfish arms. The fleshy thing was ripped and torn in a dozen places, but had come off in one solid piece.

He set it aside and dabbed at the wound with fresh toilet paper. Despite the pain, he felt surprisingly good, like hed finally taken control of the situation. The newly exposed flesh seemed incredibly sensitive, and even the slightest touch hurt. Tiny rivulets of blood slowly ran from the wounds edges.

But something wasnt right. He stared at his bloody thigh, and his incontrol feeling faded away this wasnt over, not yet. A discolored, pale whitish patch the size of a quarter sat in the wounds center.

It seemed perfectly round, but bits of normal flesh swelled up around it and covered the edges of the white patch. Perry used the pointy tweezers to poke at the white growth it seemed firm, yet flexible.

As the cold feeling of panic grabbed hold of his brain, he realized that he didnt actually feel the poking tweezers. He didnt feel them, because the whitish patch wasnt him.

When he pinched at it, the normal flesh around the edges easily peeled up and away from the white spot. The white spot was a separate . . . thing. . . from his own skin. It was as if a rounded plastic button had spontaneously grown within the muscles of his thigh.

He pushed the loose flesh from the edges of the white growth. The things shiny coating made it look like a piece of bone china.

Did cancer look like this? Maybe, but he was pretty sure that cancerous flesh didnt make perfect circles and didnt just spring up in a matter of days.

Cancer or no cancer, the sight of the milky white growth stirred a primal fear in his soul, as if a rusty bear trap had clamped down on his heart, pinching it shut, preventing it from pumping. He tried to master his breathing, tried to calm himself.

He carefully slid the tweezers under the whitish growth. The points scraped against his raw muscle, but he ignored the pain. He lifted the tweezers from the underside the hard growth tilted within his flesh, but it stayed anchored into his leg. Blood pooled each time he moved it.

He carefully used his fingers to pull his flesh back as far as it would go, probing underneath with the tweezers. Like putting your hands in your pocket and being able to see whats there, Perry felt a stem a stem that extended farther into his thigh, anchoring the white thing in place.

Doctor time.

Definitely doctor time.

But first, he wanted this thing out of his leg, and he wanted it out now. He had to remove it; he couldnt stand to leave this fucking thing in his flesh for even one more second.

With the tweezers centered on the unseen stem, Perry pulled up gently. As he lifted the growth, he felt the stems length via a strange combination of sensations from his thigh muscles and resistance against the tweezers. The whitish mass pulled free of his flesh with a pop of inrushing air. Thin blood trails arced from the open wound, splashing against his leg and

adding to the red and purple streaks on the worn tile floor, but the stem stayed firmly anchored deep in his thigh. Agonizing pain crept up his leg, but he ignored it, kept it distant from his consciousness.

He had to do this. It was time to turn the Magnificent Seven into the Big Six.

Keeping the tweezers firmly gripped on the strange stem, he yanked up as hard as he could, yanked with the strength of a condemned man fighting for his life.

The tough, resilient stem stretched and stretched and stretched, until the tweezers-gripped head was a good two feet above his thigh. It stretched thin like taffy, bits of blood and clear slime masking the milky white color.

The stretching slowed, then stopped.

With a snarl, Perry pulled harder.

The unseen anchor ripped free; the stem shot out of his leg like a rubber band and wetly slapped against his wrist.

He looked at his thigh. A narrow opening, smaller than a pencil and already closing, sank down into his raw flesh like a tiny black hole. A rivulet of blood poured out, pushed up the tube like squeezed toothpaste as the thigh muscles expanded and closed the hole.

A smile broke across Perrys face. A feeling of primitive success coursed through him, as did a limited blast of hope. He turned his attention to the strange white growth, the rounded head pinched firmly between the tweezers, the stem or tail, or whatever the hell it was wrapped wetly about his wrist, held to his skin by bloody slime.

He moved his hand toward the light to get a better look at the growth. As he rotated his wrist, marveling at the strange thing, he felt a brief tickling sensation, almost imperceptible, like the smallest mosquito trying to land.

Perrys eyes shot wide open with revulsion. He felt his stomach churn and his adrenaline surge . . .

The white things tail squirmed like a snake trapped in a predators grip. With a shout of fear, Perry threw the tweezers into the bathtub where they clanked against the white porcelain and clattered near the

drain. The squirming, wet, wiggling, white thing remained wrapped about his wrist, the tail tickling his skin as the heavy, round, plastic-button head hung limp and free, swinging wildly with Perrys every movement.

Perry screamed, both in disgust and in panic, and violently snapped his wrist as if he were flinging mud from his fingers. The white thing hit the mirror with a little splat. It looked like a moving piece of cooked spaghetti hanging loosely from the glass. Still writhing, its desperate motions smearing wet slime across the mirror, it slowly started to slide down.

That thing was inside me! That thing was alive! Its STILL alive! Perry instinctively slapped hard against the mirror, his huge hand rattling the glass with a loud bang. The squirming growth erupted as if hed slammed a soft-boiled egg. Thin gouts of thickish purple gel spewed across the mirror. Perry yanked his hand away. Bits of white flesh, now limp and saggy, covered his palm, as did globs of the purple goo. Curling his lip in revulsion, he quickly turned to grab the towel that hung from the shower curtain rod too quickly. His sudden move tangled him in the pants still hanging about his ankles. His balance gone, he fell forward.

He reached his hands out to brace his fall, but there was nothing to grab before his forehead smacked against the toilet seat. A sharp crack reverberated off the narrow bathrooms walls, but Perry was out before he even heard the sound.

23.

PARASITOLOGY

Martin Brewbaker was no more. Wednesday, less than three full days since hed been shot to death, and all that remained was a pitted black skeleton missing the legs from the knees down. That and delicate gossamer mold that now grew in little patches not only on the skeleton and on the table, but in spots all over the BSL-4 tent. Even Brewbakers talonhand had finally relaxed. It lay on the table, finger bones crumbling into a jumbled pile. Cameras inside the tent provided pictures both live and still that let Margaret watch the corpses final degenerative state.

She hadnt felt such a black sense of foreboding since her childhood, during the ever-so-deadly pissing contests between the United States and the Soviet Union. Mutually assured destruction, the promise that any conflict could rapidly escalate into full-blown nuclear war. Bang. Dead. Done.

Shed only been a young girl, but more than smart enough to grasp the potential disaster. It was funny, really, that back then her parents had thought she understood because of her high intelligence, as if only a gifted child could comprehend the imminent threat of nuclear war. But, as they had in years before and had in years since, probably always would, adults mistake childrens innocence for ignorance.

Margaret knew exactly what was going on, and so did most of her classmates. They knew the Communists were something to fear, something more tangible than the Thing Under the Bed. They knew that Manhattan, their home, would be among the first places destroyed.

Why do people think the end of the world is such a difficult concept for a child to understand? Much of childhood is spent in fear of the unknown, in fear of creeping shadows and lurking monsters and things that promise a long, ugly, and painful death. A nuclear war was just one more boogeyman that threatened to take them all away. Only this boogeyman also scared her parents and all the other grown-ups, and the children tuned in to that frequency of fear as surely as they tuned in to Bugs Bunny.

You could run from a monster, you could dodge the boogeyman, but the nuclear war was out there and out of their hands. It might come at

any moment. Maybe when she was on the playground at recess. Maybe when she sat down to dinner. Maybe after she went to bed.

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.

That hadn't just been an abstract prayer in those days. It had been a possibility as real as the sunset. She remembered living in constant fear of that unknown. Sure she played, went to school, laughed and carried on with her friends, but the threat was always there. Each thready white contrail in the sky was a potential first finger of doom.

And the game would be played out, win or lose, without her able to do anything about it. She tried to tell herself that this wasn't the same thing. She was on the forefront of this potential holocaust, after all; she was the front line of defense. This wasn't out of her control but rather quite literally resting squarely in her hands. For some reason, however, that rational, adult knowledge couldn't banish the little girl's fear that there was nothing she could do to affect this game's outcome.

She wondered how Amos could ignore that feeling, or if he even felt it at all. He hummed the theme song to Hawaii Five-O for the millionth time, yet Margaret was too tired to complain. She sipped at her coffee. She'd downed pots of the stuff, hoping it would stimulate her, yet nothing seemed to cut through her lethargy. It felt good to breathe normal air, air not filtered by the biosuit. She wanted to sleep, or at least stretch out and relax, but there really wasn't time. They needed to finish up the work, incinerate the decomposed remains, and get the hell out of that hospital.

Amos turned to her. His hair was askew, his clothes wrinkled, yet his eyes were alive with excitement.

This is really quite amazing, Margaret, he said. Think about it. This is a human parasite of unparalleled complexity. There's no question in my mind that this creature is perfectly suited to its human host.

Margaret stared at the wall, her words quiet, barely audible. I hate to paraphrase a tired old cliché, but it's almost too perfect.

What do you mean?

Like you said, the creature is ideally suited. It's like a hand in a glove. But think about it, Amos, think of current technology levels this creature is miles above that. It would be like the Russians suddenly landing on the moon while the Wright brothers were still struggling at Kitty Hawk.

It's amazing, sure, but we can't ignore the fact that it's right here in front of us. This is no time for sensitive American egos. There's some genius out there that's so far beyond us we can't even comprehend it.

What if there is no genius? Margaret asked, her voice still small.

What are you talking about? Of course there's a genius; how else could this thing have been created?

She turned to look at him, her skin almost gray, fatigue covering her face like a caul. What if it's not created? What if it's natural?

Oh come on, Margaret! I know you're tired, but you're not thinking straight. If this is natural, how could we have never seen it before? A human parasite of such size and virulence, and there isn't one documented case before this year? That doesn't make sense. For this thing to be so closely matched to human hosts would constitute millions of years of coevolution, yet we've never seen anything like this in any mammal, let alone primates or humans.

I'm sure there's many, many things we haven't seen, Margaret said. But I just can't accept that someone created this thing. It's just too complex, too advanced. Regardless of what the scare-tactic media like to spout, American science is state-of-the-art. Whose more advanced? The Chinese? Japan? Singapore? Sure, maybe some countries are starting to get an edge on us, but an edge is one thing, and an exponential shift is another. If we can't create something that's even close to this, I find it hard to believe anyone else could. That's not ego, that's just the facts.

Amos seemed annoyed by her persistence. It's highly improbable that this affliction has existed but has never been documented. Sure, there are species as yet undiscovered, I grant you that, but there's a difference between some unknown microscopic creature and this. There's nothing like this. I can't even think of a tribal myth or folktale that resembles this. So if this is natural, where in the blue blazes did it come from?

Margaret shrugged. You've got me. Maybe some kind of dormancy. This may have been a known quantity in pre-historic times, and something caused it to die out. But it didn't die out all the way. Somehow it stayed dormant for thousands of years until something caused this outbreak. There are orchid seeds that can stay dormant for twenty-five hundred years, for example.

Your theory sounds about as far-fetched as the Loch Ness Monster, Amos said.

Well, what about the coelacanth? People thought it was extinct for seventy million years until a fisherman caught one in 1938. Just because someone hasn't seen it doesn't mean it isn't there, Amos. Right, Amos said. And this thing happened to remain dormant for hundreds of years in areas of extreme population density? It would be one thing to find this deep in the Congo jungle, but quite another to find it in Detroit. This isn't AIDS, where people just die; these are defined, triangular growths. In the communication age, something like this doesn't go unreported. Pardon my brusqueness, but you'll have to find another theory.

Margaret nodded absently. Amos was right. The concept of a dormant human parasite didn't wash. Whatever these things were, they were new.

Amos changed the subject. Have Murray's men found any connection among the victims?

Nothing yet. They've traced the travel of all victims and anyone the victims came in contact with. There's no connection. Most of the victims hadn't traveled anywhere. The only link is that Judy Washington and Gary Leeland, the two Detroit cases, happened within a week of each other and happened at the same retirement home. They checked that place out with a fine-tooth comb. No one else shows any signs of infection. They've run tests on the water, the food, the air, nothing out of the ordinary, although we're still not sure what to look for so that doesn't rule anything out.

The two Toledo cases were weeks apart, but within a few blocks of each other physically. There seems to be some proximity effect. The transmission vector is unknown, but Murray still thinks theres a terrorist out there deliberately infecting random people.

That fits with our observations, Amos said. Im more and more convinced that Brewbaker and the others may have been contaminated but werent contagious. Weve found nothing on him indicative of eggs, an embryonic form, or anything else that could be responsible for new parasites. Besides, Dew hasnt shown any symptoms, nor has anyone who came in contact with Brewbakers body.

Margaret rubbed her eyes. God, she needed a nap. Shit, what she needed was a week in Bora-Bora with a sleek cabana boy named Marco catering to her every need. But she didnt have Bora-Bora, she had Toledo, Ohio. And she didnt have a cabana boy named Marco she had a gossamer-mold-covered, pitted black skeleton formerly known as Martin Brewbaker.

24.

THE BATHROOM FLOOR

The genetic blueprint recognized when the shells reached the proper thickness; energies then turned to the bodys growth. Cells split again and again and again, a nonstop engine of creation. Internal organs began to take shape, but they wouldnt fully develop until later. Because the host still provided all food and warmth, most of the internal organs could wait right now the most important needs were the tendrils, the tails and the brain.

The brain developed rapidly but remained a long way from forming anything that resembled an intelligent thought. The tendrils, however, were of a relatively simple design. They grew like wildfire, branching out in all directions, spreading into the host. The tendrils sought out the hosts nerve cells, intertwining with the dendrites like fingered hands clasping tightly together.

Starting slowly, almost tentatively, the organisms released complex chemical compounds called neurotransmitters into the synaptic cleft, the space between the tendrils and the dendrites. Each neurotransmitter was part of a signal, a message they slid into the axons receptor sites, just like a key into a lock, causing that nerve cell to generate its own neurotransmitters with its own specific message. As in the hosts normal sensory process, the action produced an electrochemical chain reaction: the messages repeated through the nervous system until they reached the hosts brain. The process from the time the message fires until it finally reaches the brain takes less than one-thousandth of a second.

Although they had yet to achieve conscious thought, at a primitive level the organisms inside Perry knew they had been attacked. They instinctively triggered an immediate growth process. The tail began a phase change of its own. Specialized cells grew, ensuring the organisms would remain anchored in their environment long enough to fully develop.

The six remaining organisms grew, rapidly and unimpeded, as the host lay passed out on his bathroom floor.

The linoleum felt nice and cool on Perrys face. He didnt really want to try to sit up. As long as he lay still, the pain was only mildly intolerable.

When was the last time hed been knocked out? Eight years ago? No, it was nine, when his dad had hit him in the back of the head with a full bottle of Wild Turkey whiskey. Hed wound up with nine stitches in his scalp.

Had it hurt this bad after Dad hit him with the bottle? That was so long ago, and it seemed like nothing compared to the dull waves of pain that now washed through his head. He tried to sit up, which only made it worse. It was like a tequila hangover times ten.

He felt sick to his stomach. Every little move toward an upright position shot more thick blasts of pain through his skull. He felt a puke coming on, working its way around his lukewarm, queasy stomach.

He reached up and gingerly touched his abused forehead. At least he wasnt bleeding. He felt a pronounced bump, a half golf ball embedded in his skull.

He realized his pants were around his ankles, which added to the difficulty of sitting up. This was going to be a wonderful story to tell at parties just as soon as he remembered what that story was. He slowly rolled to his back and pulled up his jeans. The room looked fuzzy and out of focus.

Perry grabbed the toilet seat. It wobbled weirdly as he used it to pull himself up. The seat was cracked in two at the ovals front edge. Must have done that with his head.

His stomach churned once, twice, then rebelled. Perry leaned forward and vomited into the toilet, spilling a large quantity of bile into the water, a guttural grunt echoing in the ceramic bowl. His clenched stomach relaxed its grip, allowing him to breathe, but the air froze in his throat as shearing pain cut through his head.

His eyes shut tight. He groaned weakly against the rhythmic pounding of his skull. The pain immobilized him as assuredly as a straitjacket. He couldnt even get to his feet to find a dozen or so Excedrin.

Somewhere in his head he remembered hearing that people puke when they get a concussion. He wondered how boxers or pro quarterbacks put up with it. This feeling wasnt worth any amount of money.

Another wave of nausea slammed into his stomach, pushing more bile into the cloudy bowl. The acrid odor of vomit filled the bathroom.

The smell made him even more nauseous, which made his head hurt more, which made him feel like puking yet again. It was one of those vicious circles that make even nonreligious people ask God what they had done to deserve such

trauma.

Must have been a child molester in a previous life, he muttered to himself. That or Genghis Khan.

A third wave of nausea hit him. There was nothing left to vomit, but his stomach didnt care. It clenched with explosion-violent fury that doubled him over, pushing his head almost into the toilet bowl. His face scrunched as tight as his clamped diaphragm. His stomach refused to relax for a full five seconds, preventing him from drawing a breath. When it finally relaxed and air filled his lungs, he opened his watering eyes just in time for the pain to slam into his head like a seventymile-per-hour semi truck squashing a baby raccoon. He saw a few black spots, then his face slid back onto the cool linoleum.

25.

DELUSIONAL PARASITOSIS

Morgellons disease.

Margaret stared in disbelief at the CDC report. The disease that wasnt a disease at all, but believed by the majority of the health-care community to be delusional parasitosis.

Delusional, Margaret said. Get a load of that.

Seems the vast majority of the cases are, Amos said. Symptoms range from feelings of biting or stinging to things crawling under the skin. Some cases have the strange fibers, and most involve some form of mental condition: depression, acute onset of ADHD, bipolar disorder and . . . take a guess at the last three.

Paranoia, psychosis and psychopathy?

Youre just racking up the cee-gars these days, Margo.

Margaret, Amos and Clarence Otto waited in the hospital directors office, a plaque-lined room with warm wood paneling and four wellgroomed potted ficus trees. The director had been asked to leave by the persuasive Agent Otto, who apologized for the intrusion while at the same time leaving no possible way for the director to say no. Margaret thought Otto was a born salesman a guy who could make you do whatever he wanted while making you think it was your idea the whole time. Margaret and Amos sat on a leather couch, both looking at pages of a report spread out on a coffee table. Otto had taken the directors chair, behind the ornate wooden desk. He spun the chair in slow circles and seemed to relish the implied authority of the spot smiling like a little kid playing grown-up boss.

Murray was on his way. They would give him their report face-to-face.

I know Im the dummy of the bunch, Otto said. So pardon me for asking but you have a CDC report. What youre saying is the stuff you guys have been studying for the past few days, that turns out to be a known factor?

Amos shook his head. No, not even close. This Morgellons thing, people dont know if its real or a kind of group delusion. It took years of pressure from victims groups to force the CDC to at least pretend to take it seriously. The CDC created a task force, but so far they dont even have a clear case definition of what Morgellons is. Most of the cases actually do turn out to be delusional parasitosis. People think theyre infected with something, organisms that can only be observed by the patient. In fact, the term Morgellons has been around for just a few years, and since it started to get publicity, more and more people report the symptoms.

Which means its spreading, Margaret said.

Not necessarily. It could mean that, or it could mean that once unstable people hear about the disease, their minds decide thats what they have. They invent the symptoms in their own brain hence the delusional part.

Otto spun in the directors chair, three full circles as he spoke. So the more people that claim to have this disease, the more publicity it gets, then more people hear about it, and then more people think they have it.

Full circle of nuttiness, Amos said.

Goddamn Murray, Margaret said. Hes right about keeping this quiet. This is exactly what he said would happen if word got out. And thats just for this itchy thing, the bugs-under-the-skin thing. Just imagine what the response is going to be like if people see pictures of the triangles.

Or get wind of grannies slicing up their kids, then playing all Scarface with the cops, Otto said. Psycho grandmamas would definitely upset Mister and Missus Average American.

Amos nodded. Murray does have a point, I suppose. There were a dozen Morgellons cases five years ago, now there are over fifteen hundred, reported in all fifty states and in Europe.

So why havent we heard more about the triangles? Margaret asked. We know this isnt delusional. Weve seen the little buggers, and weve seen the chemical imbalances in Brewbakers brain. This is real, Amos.

Because most of the cases are delusional, but not all. Its the fibers, Margaret. There are documented cases with blue, red, black and white fibers that are made up of cellulose. There have been three instances where doctors had the fibers analyzed over the past four years, and guess what they had the exact chemical composition as Brewbakers. Exact, as in down to the molecules.

Your fizzles.

Amos smiled. Yes, the fizzles. We have the triangle cases weve seen in the past few weeks. Lets assume those are cases where the organism made it to the larval stage. However, this Morgellons research indicated there have been multiple cases, over several years, where we see the fibers, where we see fizzles. Its possible there were full-blown larval infections before the last few weeks, sure, but if they existed, no one has heard about them.

Agent Otto whipped himself in circles. He seemed to be trying to see how many spins he could get off of one push. So the fibers have been around for a while, but only now are reaching this larval stage? Does that mean theyre evolving?

Margaret started to speak, a kind of automatic reaction to correct a laymans guess at science, but stopped. Otto oversimplified it, but his concept was right on the money.

Amos, Margaret said, has this task force been mapping the occurrences of the actual fibers?

Amos shrugged. I would imagine so, but Im not sure. Wed have to talk to them.

Margaret flipped through the pages. Doctor Frank Cheng. Hes the project lead. I need to talk to this man. I dont know if Murray will let me call him.

Margaret, may I say something? Otto asked.

Sure.

He spun once in his chair, then gripped the desk with both hands, smiling the whole time. You seem to let people push you around. You ever notice that?

She felt her face turning red. Just because she had a problem, and everyone knew she had a problem, didnt mean Otto had to actually talk about it.

Thats none of your business, she said.

Because it seems to me youre a lot stronger than you think. Were dealing with some pretty crazy stuff here, am I right?

She nodded.

So if youve got something you feel we need to do, maybe you should stop being such a pussy.

Excuse me?

Amos slapped the coffee table. Preach on, Brother Otto! I said, Margaret, stop being such a pussy.

I heard what you said.

So stop letting Murray tell you what to do.

Margarets jaw dropped. Are you completely deranged? Hes the deputy director of the CIA, man! How can I not let him tell me what to do?

So hes the deputy director. Do you know what you are?

Tell her! Amos screamed. He stood and raised his hands to the sky. Tell the good sister what she is!

Yes, Agent Otto, please tell me what I am.

Otto spun twice, then spoke. You are the lead epidemiologist studying a new, unknown disease with horrific implications.

Horrific! Amos echoed.

You are short-staffed, and you cant get the experts you should have.

Its a sin! Amos said.

Amos, Margaret said, just knock it the fuck off.

Amos smiled, then picked up a magazine off the coffee table and sat down, pretending to read.

Margaret, he put you in charge of this. What will happen if you insist on talking to this Cheng guy? Do you think Murray is going to bring in someone else to replace you?

She started to speak, then stopped. No. Murray wouldnt do that. Not because she was the end-all be-all, but because he wanted to keep this tight as a drum. Murray needed her.

So, Otto said as he gave one strong push. He started spinning, speaking one syllable on each revolution, almost as if hed read her mind. Use . . . what...you...have.

Her anger faded.

Agent Clarence Otto was right.

THE POISON PILL

The seedlings continuously monitored development, fed by data from the roaming readers. At a certain point, the seedlings checklists determined that the readers jobs were completed. A chemical signal rolled through the host. The readers went through a phase change. With a simple adjustment, the sawlike jaws dropped off and the balls sealed up tight.

Inside the balls, death started to brew.

They inflated, filling themselves with a new chemical compound. Herders moved the chemical balls throughout the framework, wedging them here, wedging them there.

Where the jaws had been, a crusty cap appeared. The deadly compound ate away at the inside of the cap, but the seedlings flooded the structure with another chemical that added thickness to the cap from the outside. It was a delicate balance, but as long as the seedlings remained alive, kept making the chemical, the poison balls would remain sealed.

If the seedlings ceased to function, however, the caps would disintegrate and the vile catalyst inside would spread through the framework, dissolving it, the modified stem cells and all the cells they had created. Cells would blacken, die, then dissolve, the resulting waste material moving on to poison other cells. The ensuing chain reaction would dissolve every soft tissue it reached framework, muscle, skin, organs . . . everything.

To stop this from happening, the seedlings had to survive.

But this host had no way of knowing that.

GOOD-BYE

Im sorry, Mister Phillips, the doctor said. He just slipped away. We thought we had him out of the woods, and then

he was just gone.

Dew stared at the doctor, who looked tired and bedraggled. It wasn't the doctor's fault; the man had done everything possible. Dew still couldn't stop the wave of fury that swept over him, that had him wondering how easy it would be to snap the little doctor's skinny neck.

What killed him?

It wasn't one particular thing. I think the whole incident was just too much for his body to handle. To be blunt, he should have died back on Monday, but he was strong enough to fight another sixty hours. Because of that, we thought we might be able to save him, but there was just too much damage. I'm very sorry. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go talk to his wife.

No, Dew snapped. Then, quietly, No, I'll do it. I was his partner.

As you like, Mister Phillips, the doctor said. I'll be nearby if you need me.

The doctor strode away. Dew stared at the floor, gathering his courage. It wasn't the first time he'd lost a partner, and it wasn't the first time he'd had to break the news to a new widow. It never got easier. It was funny how you could get used to killing, but not to death.

He wearily looked down the hall. Shamika stared at him, her son, Jerome, asleep in her lap. Her eyes filled with tears of denial. She knew. Dew still had to tell her, though; the words had to be said.

He walked toward her. Dew remembered another hospital, a day six years earlier, the day Jerome was born. He remembered sitting in the waiting room with Malcolm, who'd been so nervous he'd thrown up twice. He remembered talking to Shamika just hours after the delivery.

He kept walking toward her. She started shaking her head side to side, clutching Jerome tighter. She mumbled warbling words that couldn't be understood, yet their meaning rang clear. Dew wished he were anywhere else, anywhere but facing this crying woman, the wife of his friend, his partner . . . the man he'd failed to protect. He fought back tears of his own, an empty sorrow rolling in his chest alongside the burning hatred and rage. The only thing that kept him strong was the knowledge he'd find out who was responsible. And when he did, oh daddy, daddy-o, the fun he would have.

THE BATHROOM FLOOR AGAIN

For a moment, Perry slipped back in time. He was seventeen. His mother crying, as usual, shaking him gently. Perry slowly opening his eyes, feeling the pain roaring through his brain, fingers touching the back of his head, coming away with blood. His dad sitting at the kitchen table, drinking steadily from the bottle of Wild Turkey that he'd used as a weapon against his only child.

The bottle wore a small streak of tacky blood, half on the label, half beaded up on the glass.

Jacob Dawsey stared at his son, his cold eyes fixed in their permanently angry stare. How you feelin, boy?

Perry slowly sat up, his head throbbing so bad he could barely see.

Someday, Daddy, Perry mumbled, someday I'm going to kill you.

Jacob Dawsey took another swig, his eyes never leaving his son. He set the blood-streaked bottle on the table, then wiped his mouth with the back of his dirty hand. You just remember that it's a violent world, son, and only the strong survive. I'm preparing you is all someday you'll thank me. Someday, you'll understand.

Perry shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, and found himself lying on his own bathroom floor. It wasn't nine years ago. He wasn't in Cheboygan. Daddy was dead. That chapter of his life was over, but that didn't make his head feel any better.

His face felt crusty and squishy on the linoleum. The scent of bile filled his nose. Didn't take him long to figure out why. His rebellious stomach had apparently found something else to cough up while he was passed out.

A little shiver tickled his soul. It was a good thing he'd been lying facedown, or he could have choked on his own vomit, just like Bon Scott the original lead singer from the band AC/DC. Bon had passed out in the back of a black Cadillac, so the story went, bombed out of his skull on whiskey and perhaps a few other controlled substances, so blasted he couldn't wake up; he drowned in his own puke.

Perry wiped his hand across his face, scraping away vomit slime. He

had some in his hair as well. His stomach felt tired but otherwise fine; the regurgitation festival was apparently over. Most of the awful smell emanated from the toilet bowl. Perry laboriously sat up and flushed.

How the hell had this happened? Vague, out-of-focus pieces flitted back and forth across his brain like moths circling a streetlight. His left leg ached with a cold-iron throbbing.

Using the counter to pull himself to his feet, he slowly stood. His whole body felt very weak, which made him wonder how long he'd been unconscious. In the bathroom with the door half shut, there was no way of telling time; sunlight could not reach down the hall.

Resting his weight against the sink, he looked at himself in the mirror. Look like shit couldn't describe it. A green-yellow film of vomit caked the right side of his face, matting down his hair. A black-and-blue bump on his forehead stuck out like a unicorn's starter kit. The dark circles under his eyes were so pronounced they were almost comical, as if he were wearing overdone movie makeup meant for an extra in *Night of the Living Dead*.

What really caught his eye wasn't his face, but the dried-up crap all over his mirror. Rivulets of some odd liquid had dribbled down the glass, then dried in black streaks. Papery chunks of grayish matter clumped on the mirror like old paste, or perhaps a smashed insect.

Only it wasn't an insect, and Perry knew that. Memories of the mess on the mirror jostled his fuzzed-out, pain-fogged brain. He didn't know what it was, but he knew it was evil. The thing was death, something to be very afraid of. At least it had been something to be afraid of.

He needed some Tylenol and he needed to wash this filth from his body. Even reaching down to turn on the shower made his head pound. He couldn't remember the last time he'd hurt like this, or if he'd ever hurt like this.

Doctor time, he mumbled to himself. Fucking doctor time.

Perry headed to the kitchen for some Tylenol. He moved slowly and carefully, holding his head as if he might stop his hammering brain from falling onto the floor. He looked at the stove's digital clock: 12:15.

It took his thudding head a minute to get the picture, and he actually asked himself how the sun could be out at a quarter past midnight, then realized his stupidity with a small sigh. It was 12:15 P.M. a quarter past noon. He'd slept through work. There was no way he could go in, at

least not until his head felt better. He told himself hed call in and try to explain things, but only after a shower. The Tylenol bottle sat on the microwave, right next to the wooden cutlery block that held the knives. His eyes rested on the chicken scissors. Only their brown plastic handles showed, but hidden inside the block of wood were the scissors thick, stubby blades that could easily cut through raw meat as if it were paper and chicken bone as if it were a dry twig. They held his fascination for a moment, then he reached for the Tylenol bottle. He tossed four pills into his mouth, made a bowl out of his hands and gulped tap water to swallow them down. That done, he shambled back toward the bathroom, stripping off clothes as he went. He stepped into the steaming shower and basked in the spray, tilting his head to let the water wash the slime from his hair and face. The stinging-hot water revived his flaccid muscles. The fog in his brain lifted a touch. He hoped the Tylenol would kick in soon his head hurt so bad he could barely see.

29.

MOTIVATION

Dew refused to cry. Just wasnt going to happen. It wanted to come out, and he had trouble fighting it back, but no way in hell. He wasnt in this business to make friends. It hurt, sure it did, but Malcolm Johnson wasnt his first friend to die in the line of duty.

How much of this did he have to deal with? How much could he take? How many more people did he have to see die? How many more people . . . did he have to kill?

He sniffled and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He needed to reconnect.

Dew picked up his small cell phone, the normal one, and dialed. It rang three times before she answered.

Hello?

Hi, Cynthia, its Dew.

Oh, hi, how are you? Her words carried history, decades of back story, if you will. Dew and Cynthia had hated each other once, hated each other with a passion that went even beyond what he felt for the enemy during a battle. That hatred was born out of love, deep, allencompassing love for the same person.

That person was Sharon, Dews only child.

To tell you the truth, Ive been a lot better, a lot of times, Dew said. But dont tell Sharon that, okay?

Sure thing. You want me to put her on?

Please.

Hold on one sec.

They would never, ever be friends, he and Cynthia, but at least they had respect for each other. They had to, because Sharon loved them both, and when Dew and Cynthia fought, it tore Sharon apart.

It had been hard to hear that his little girl thought she was a lesbian. But that was nothing compared to the pain and anger he felt seven years later when he heard Sharon and Cynthia were more than partners they had performed some union ceremony or what have you, and they were basically married. Wife and wife. Hed raged, screamed at them both, called

them names he wished he hadnt. Cynthia, of course, had screamed back. She wanted to protect Sharon, Dew understood that now. Cynthia also happened to despise men in general, especially gruff, bossy, unemotional military men which happened to sum up Dew Phillips in a nutshell. But Cynthias constant attacks on Dew, both when he was there and when he wasnt, took their toll on Sharon. Dew hated. Cynthia hated. Sharon just wasnt wired that way. Sharon loved, pure and simple.

It took another two years after the union bullshit, but Dew finally understood that this was the real deal for his daughter. This wasnt a passing fancy she was going to be with Cynthia for the rest of her life. Once he came to that realization, he did what any good soldier would do he sucked it up and he got the job done. Hed met Cynthia at what they both called the SDMZ, or the Starbucks Demilitarized Zone, and they agreed on an uneasy dtente. They could hate each other all they wanted, and nothing could change that, but they agreed to be civil and to treat each other with respect. And over the years, in the process of being civil, he came to understand that Cynthia was a good kid as far as bull dykes go, that is.

Hi, Daddy! Sharons voice, unchanged from the time she was five. Well, that was bullshit, and Dew knew it, but thats exactly what his ears heard every time she talked.

Hi, sugar. How are you?

Im doing great. Im so glad you called. How are you? Tip-top. Couldnt be better. Work is going well.

Youre still doing the desk job? He heard the worry in her voice.

Theyre not making you go out in the field anymore, right? Of course not, at my age? That would be crazy.

It most certainly would.

Listen, sugar, I only have a minute. I just wanted to call and hear your voice.

Well here it is. When are you coming to Boston again? I want to see you. We can go out, just you and me.

Dew swallowed. If a gutted Malcolm Johnson wasnt going to make him cry, he sure as shit wouldnt let the waterworks go over a phone call with his daughter.

Come on, sugar, you know Im okay with Cynthia now. Well all go out, spend some time together.

Dew almost laughed when he heard Sharon sniffle. Whereas he could hold back tears seemingly forever, she cried if the wind blew funny. Yeah, I know, Daddy. And you have no idea what that means to me. What it means to us.

Stop with the crying already. I got to go. Ill talk to you soon. Bye now.

Bye-bye, Daddy. And be careful. You might get a splinter from that desk. Dew hung up. He took one deep breath, and then the emotions faded away, pushed back to their normal hiding place. That was what he needed, to reconnect with the why of what he did. It was for her. It was for a country in which his daughter could live as she pleased, even if that meant living with another woman, even if her father hated it, and hated her mate, with all his heart. There were many places in the world where Sharon would have been killed or worse for doing what came naturally to her. Was that cliché? To keep on fighting, and killing when need be, because America was the greatest nation on earth? Probably, but Dew didn't care if the reasons were good, logical or even cliché. They were his reasons. And that was enough.

30.

MR. CONGENIALITY

Margaret, Amos and Clarence Otto stood as Murray Longworth entered the commandeered office. Murray shook everyone's hands, then all three sat. Murray, of course, sat behind the big desk.

What have you got for me? We got you a relatively fresh one this time. I trust that an unrotted body gave us some clues as to what the hell these things are?

Margaret led the charge. It didn't stay unrotted for long. All the tissue is gone. Only his skeleton is left it looks the same as the remains of Judy Washington and Charlotte Wilson. We have the liquefied remains, but I think we've learned all we can from that material. Before Brewbaker fully decomposed, however, we were able to gather some valuable and disturbing information. First of all, we believe the growth isn't a modification of tissue, but rather it's a parasitical organism.

Murray's face wrinkled in mild disgust. It's a parasite? What makes you think that?

Just as with Charlotte Wilson's case, the growth itself was already decomposed. We could get nothing from it, but we found structures in the surrounding tissue that made us classify it as a parasite. The growths are tapped into the host's circulatory system, drawing oxygen and possibly nutrients from the blood.

Murray stared at her, like a limestone statue just beginning to show the effects of wind, rain and erosion. What you're telling me is that these triangular things are alive, that they're not part of the victim but rather a separate, living creature?

Exactly.

So why are the hosts, as you call them, going nuts?

We found excessive neurotransmitter levels in the brain, Margaret said. Neurotransmitters are the substances that pass signals from nerve cell to nerve cell, allowing the body to communicate with the brain and vice versa, as well as allowing the brain to function. Dopamine and serotonin, in particular, were at extremely high levels. Excess dopamine is implicated in severe schizophrenia, and excess serotonin can cause psychotic

behavior and paranoia. We also found extremely high levels of epinephrine and norepinephrine throughout the brain. These two hormones are vital to the fight-or-flight response, key in reaction to emergencies and perceived threats. They also cause some of the physiological expressions of fear and anxiety. When the hormones exceed normal levels, anxiety disorders are very common.

Murray nodded with understanding. So these parasites make people go crazy by increasing neurotransmitters?

Right, Amos said. But there's more. The parasite grows structures that mimic human nerves. We found such structures in the area surrounding the growth, but we found traces in the brain as well, particularly in the cerebral cortex and the limbic region.

What's the limbic region?

Margaret answered. It's a cluster of areas including the thalamus, the hippocampus and the amygdala, among others, that is thought to control emotion and comprise the basic structures for memory storage and recall. The growths in that area may have been some kind of endocrine system for secreting the excess neurotransmitters. Based on case studies of excess dopamine in the limbic region, hosts may develop extremely acute paranoia. That's consistent with the behavior observed in Brewbaker, Blaine Tanarive, Gary Leeland and Charlotte Wilson. But if the growth was actually artificial nerves, it may have had another purpose it's possible the parasite was somehow wired into the brain. Anger flashed in Murray's eyes. Oh come on. I agree with your drug delivery theory, that makes sense, but wired into the brain? What are you saying, that this isn't just some chemical overdose, that the parasite is somehow controlling the host?

It is a possibility, she said.

Why don't you just tell me the hosts are possessed by evil demons, Doctor Montoya? I'm beginning to suspect I made a serious mistake by putting you in charge of this. How the hell can you expect me to believe a parasite can control people, make them do all those horrible things?

We didn't say the parasite used people like some kind of robot, Amos said. However, there are parallels found in nature where parasites modify the host's behavior. For example, there is a trematode that parasitizes a species of mud snail. To complete its life cycle, the trematode must pass from a snail to a sand flea. The trematode larva somehow forces snails to high ground, out of the water, where the snails will die. It makes them commit suicide, if you will. At that point the trematode exits the snail and enters a flea. Think also of the thorny-headed worm, which starts in a cockroach and moves on to a rat. To facilitate the change, the worm actually makes the cockroach less aware of

danger, so it is more likely to be eaten by a rat. Then there is the