

Gray Skies Over Utopia

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Jake awoke in a strange bed. The sweet smell of antiseptic cleansers engulfed him like an unwanted but reassuring hug. His mind was in a fog. As it lifted, he remembered what had happened to him.

Yesterday, Jake had awoken in his own bed. His chest felt tight, his throat raspy. Then, suddenly, he did something he'd never done before, something he'd never seen anyone else do. He opened his mouth wide, his head jutting forward, and a low, harsh sound erupted from his throat. Then it happened again, and again. Hearing the strange, frightening sound, his parents had come running into his room, panicked looks on their faces. His father quickly covered his own mouth and nose with the sleeve of his shirt as

his mother yelled, “Stay away!” to his younger brother, Andrew, who was lurking in the hallway. Sensors in the house immediately alerted the Department of Disease Containment, or DDC. Within minutes, DDC agents had arrived and covered the house in a plastic containment bubble. Agents wearing sterile hazmat suits entered the house through the bubble’s system of airlock tubes.

“Everyone remain calm,” one of the agents ordered. “This house is now under immediate quarantine. No one is to enter or leave the premises until further notice.”

Jake had tried to stay calm as the agents swept through every room of the house, scanning for stray bacterial and viral particles. When they had finished, he and his family were led out of the house through one of the plastic tubes and into a large, airtight van. Jake heard air hissing as the van’s doors closed and the tube was disconnected. Two medics, also wearing sterile, white hazmat suits, fussed with instruments that recorded Jake’s and his family members’ vital signs. As the hydrogen-powered van drove silently away, Jake looked out the window to see two black DDC trucks parked on his front lawn. A dozen agents in sterile white suits carrying scanning equipment were running around his house.

Jake coughed again in the van, and the medics froze for a moment and stared at him, their eyes behind their plastic face shields displaying a mixture of pity and fear. Andrew closed his eyes tight as he huddled close to his mother.

This can’t be happening,” his father said. “I have to be on-site today.”

Jake’s father ran a construction business. The prearranged weather patterns, with zero possibility of dangerous weather or seismic events, such as earthquakes or volcanoes, were a gift to him. Houses and offices could be constructed out of recycled plastic and concrete amalgams and his father didn’t need to worry about meeting the more rigorous safety standards of the “bad old days,” as he called them. He was able to save tons of money on each project, while building houses that were still safe in their predictable environment.

Jake was taken to a DDC hospital, a one-story, stone-gray building that he thought looked like an army bunker. A small staff of medical assistants helped the hospital’s sole doctor treat any rare, serious accidents, or study the even rarer cases of infectious disease that might happen once every decade.

The medics unloaded Jake from the van first, placing him into a clear plastic box on a stretcher. Jake felt as though he were lying in a see-through coffin. They wheeled him down a corridor devoid of anyone else, and passed through several more airlocks, before finally reaching his room, which seemed to have been built backward. On one side was a solid wall without any windows, while the opposite wall facing into the hospital was lined with glass. He could see tables, chairs, and equipment in the room on the other side of the large, wall-length window.

Soon after Jake had been moved from his plastic box and placed onto the bed, a man in a white lab coat entered the room on the other side of the glass wall. He looked at Jake, checked the instruments, then left again. Why doesn’t he tell me what’s wrong with me, Jake wondered, trying to make sense of what was happening to him.

No matter how hard Jake tried to suppress them, the coughs kept coming as he lay in bed. His face felt warm, his skin wet. He’d never been sick before — no fevers, no sore throats, not even a snuffle. He didn’t know where his parents and his brother were, or if they were OK.

Late in the afternoon, the acoustic membrane embedded in the wall over his head hummed to life.

“Hello, Jake,” came a voice through the membrane, startling Jake. He looked around and saw the man in the white lab coat speaking on the other side of the window. “How do you feel?”

“Strange,” Jake said, and began coughing again.

“Take it easy,” said the man, who Jake assumed was the doctor. “That’s some cough you’ve got there.”

“Am I going to be OK?” Jake asked.

“We’re running some tests now. You’ve got us stumped, but I’m sure we’ll be able to figure out what’s going on very soon.”

“How’s my family?”

“They’re doing just fine. So far, no coughing, but we’re going to wait a few more days before we let them leave the hospital just to be safe. You’ll be able to see them just as soon as we know what this cough is. I’ll be back later tonight to check on you again. Just try to relax.”

The doctor left and the lights dimmed. The patient was left alone for the rest of the day.

Jake couldn't understand what was happening to him. He retraced his steps of the past few days to see if he could figure out how he had gotten sick. Two days before he woke up coughing, he had been on a field trip with his class to the local weather control station. A few puffy, white clouds floated in the bright, blue sky like sterile cotton balls. As their hydrogen-powered school bus hummed to a stop in front of the gray, amalgamated block building, a ruddy-cheeked woman wearing a khaki-colored sun visor marched out to greet them. She introduced herself as the director of the weather control station.

“You are all so lucky to be living in this day and age,” she had said, leading them up the ramp and into the building. “It only rains when and where we need it to, no chance of a hurricane or tornado springing up and taking us by surprise. Clear blue skies, twenty-four/seven. Let me show you how we do it.”


She showed the class the different instruments, how they communicated with low-level satellites in orbit that could zap clouds or tornadoes out of existence, or create gentle rain with another type of zap. Large tanks in a field outside the station held reservoirs of water that could be used to generate clouds whenever they were needed. Send a signal up to the satellite, and, zap! instant rain.

Jake and his friend, Daniel, lingered at the back of the crowd, not paying attention to the director. They itched to get back outside, to run in the field under that perfect, blue sky.

After the tour, they enjoyed a picnic lunch in the field, sitting in the shadows of the large, open water tanks. Recalling the picnic now, Jake remembered that the ground had felt unusually damp, but he didn’t think much of it at the time.

The glass wall in Jake’s room glowed with light as the doctor’s voice broke the silence. “Hello Jake. I hope you’re feeling comfortable.”

Jake turned toward the window. The familiar doctor stood in the little room beyond, along with a half dozen other people in white lab coats.

"This might sound odd, but we want to thank you for developing your cough," the 

doctor continued. "You're the most exciting thing that's happened around here in years. Everyone wants to get a look at you."

"So do you know what's wrong with me?" Jake asked, not wanting to be a sideshow for a bunch of bored medical assistants.

"You have a disease called 'pneumonia.' We thought we'd gotten rid of all the possible types of bacteria that cause it, but they're crafty little buggers; they keep changing on us."

Jake didn't know what "new-mow-nya" was, and he really didn't care to know.

"Will I be all right?" he asked.

"We've run some computer simulations on the sample we collected, and we think we've genetically engineered just the right virus to do the trick and knock it out of your system. We'll be pumping it in through the air vents in a moment. Just keep breathing in normally and let it do its job."

Jake was confused. "How's a virus going to help?" he asked.

"It's kind of like fighting fire with fire," answered the doctor. "We made a virus that only does one thing — it injects a short piece of DNA into the bacteria. The DNA uses the bacteria's own ability to make proteins to create an enzyme, a type of chemical, that can break down the bacteria's cell wall. The bacteria simply falls apart. Then your own white blood cells clean up the mess."

Jake relaxed for the first time since he'd arrived at the hospital. Of course, genetic engineering was the ace in the hole. He should have had faith that it would only be a matter of time before they figured it out.

"But how could I have gotten sick in the first place?" he asked.

"We looked at your tracking record, to see where you'd been in the past week, and we think that you picked it up on your trip to the weather station. A bacteria living in the damp soil must have mutated. The DDC is sending out agents right now to check the water in the reservoirs, and it's a good thing, too. If that water had been vaporized for cloud formation. . . Well, there's no telling how far and wide that bacteria would have spread."

As a mist carrying the genetically engineered virus blew into his room, Jake imagined the water in the reservoirs rising into the air to form rain clouds, secretly carrying with it billions of invisible bacteria cells. When the rain fell back to the ground over a farm or a reservoir that contained a city's supply of drinking water, the bacteria could have made many more people sick. It would have been a health crisis of epic proportions not seen in decades.

"You really helped us avert a disaster. Thanks for keeping us on our toes," the doctor said. The beaming doctor gave Jake a thumb's up, and Jake could tell that he meant what he had said.

Jake breathed in deeply, smiling to himself with each breath he took. He and his family were going to be all right. He couldn't feel it, but he pictured the virus going to work to kill the bacteria in his body. Soon, everything would be perfect again.