



SICKNESS

A NOVEL BY
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Sickness

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Holed Up

Dave awoke in a bed upstairs to the low *thrum* of distant explosions. His shoes had been removed and there was a moist dish cloth sliding from his bruised forehead. His eyes blurred in the light of the afternoon sun that shone through the window. Groggily, he rose to his elbows and tried to think. He silently cursed the infantile reaction to his fear and turned his sore neck to the right.

Jake stood by the open window, looking out into the front yard. He held a scoped hunting rifle. There was a yellow plastic cartridge box on his desk. A pair of rubber earplugs hung from his neck on a blue plastic cord. In the chair to the right of the window sat his survival vest.

Dave had seen the army surplus vest before. Jake had bought it and every ridiculous thing that hung from it out of boredom and geekery. They were fifteen then, and only Jake had ever fired a real gun before. Dave had said that if a shitstorm scenario became even slightly plausible, he would make a bee-line for Jake's house. He sat fully upright in

the bed and squinted at Jake's gear.

Another distant *boom* snapped him completely to his senses. He rose from the bed and shuffled over to Jake.

"Jake, what..."

"Shhhh!" shushed Jake, his right hand leaving the grip to raise two *shut the hell up* fingers at Dave. "Quiet!" He was whispering now.

Dave slowly tiptoed toward Jake, who began wagging his *shut the hell up* fingers in a *don't move!* motion. Dave froze. Jake slowly edged from the window and ducked toward Dave. His eyes were frightened, but he'd dropped his brow.

"There's someone in the front yard," Jake whispered, still barely audible to Dave, even at the close, cramped proximity. "It's a woman. She's just standing in the yard, not moving. She's the only person I've seen in an hour."

"What are you going to do?" whispered Dave, eyeing the rifle.

"I don't know. She stumbled into the yard about an hour ago and fell down. About fifteen minutes later, she got up and hasn't moved since. I'm thinking she went crazy with whatever those people had

who attacked that farmer.”

“What farmer?” Dave asked.

“The farmer on TV, he was attacked by some crazy people. He shot one of them and it didn’t even stop him. He said they ate his dog.”

“Like those people at school!” Dave shout-whispered.

“Yeah, and like those people at the hospital. I’m thinking she’s one of them,” Jake whispered in reply. His hands tightened around the stock of the rifle.

“So, what are you going to do?” Dave asked, slightly surpassing the whisper level.

Jake shushed again. “Quiet, goddamn it! Nothing! We’re going to stay here and keep quiet so that they won’t know we’re here.”

“But what if they try to break in?” Dave asked, quieter this time.

Jake smiled. “It’s already taken care of. I boarded the place up while you were out. It’ll take a fucking army to break into Fort Jones. I brought all of our gear up here, too, along with our food and water and some guns and ammo from the basement. I guess my dad reloaded some ammo recently.” He

pointed to the pile of junk on the desk. “We’ve got a .22-250, .40 caliber for my Glock, and about a hundred 12 gauge shells for the shotty. I also found six .357 magnums for the hand-cannon.” Jake nodded to the chair.

Lying on the floor in front of the chair were Jake’s Smith & Wesson .357 magnum, his Remington 870 shotgun with the funky stock, and his Glock 22 pistol. The latter had been a Christmas gift the year before from Jake’s dad, and was one of Jake’s more treasured possessions. The laser-light in the rail was from Grandpa.

“Have you shot a gun yet?” Jake whispered in inquiry.

Dave closed his eyes and shook his head. “No,” he stammered. “Only BB guns.”

The idea of ever having to really use a gun for survival had never truly entered Dave’s mind before that day, which is why he never learned how to, even being the son of a police officer.

“Fuck. Well, if they do eventually bust in here, you can carry the gear while I try and take care of business with the guns. But for right now let’s just lay low,” Jake said, and as he finished, the sound of screeching tires became swiftly audible.

The simultaneous *crash* and *groan* of crumpling metal and shattering glass shook the room, and Jake moved to the window.

Peeking above the windowsill, he saw the woman from the front yard staggering toward the half-imploded car against the phone pole across the street. He heard the signature moan that the television stations had been focusing on. Looking across the street at the wrecked car, Jake saw a young woman struggling to pull her mangled lower half from the driver's side of the car through the shattered window.

The woman from the yard was only a few meters from her now and reached out toward her, grasping at the air. Jake watched in black and twisted horror as the woman from the yard began taking lunging bites at the crippled woman's arms. The lady was unable to get her entire upper body back into the driver's seat in time, and after about three minutes, her stripped arm bones sat in a pool of blood below the driver's side window of the car where her lifeless body slumped. The blood-soaked cannibal rose from the bones and staggered off, drawn to the sound of a not-so-distant explosion.

Jake shrank down from the window against the

wall. He was on the verge of shock, and the small lucid part of his mind realized that there was no way that he would be able to fire the rifle with any hint of accuracy in this state. His breathing quickened and his hands trembled violently. He set the rifle on the floor.

His cry was short and guttural, and only a single tear escaped his eyelid. After a moment of wide-eyed staring, he buried his face in his hand.

Dave didn't know what to do. He didn't want to move, but he didn't want his friend to be alone by the window. Slowly he crawled on hands and knees to Jake and grabbed him by the shirt on left shoulder. He tugged Jake over to the other side of the room and sat him down.

"What did you see?" Dave asked, nearly whimpering.

Jake's eyes rose to meet Dave's. They were puffy and wet and full of fear.

"It's just like they said on TV. The woman from the yard ate the woman from the car. She bit big chunks out of her arm, until it was just bone. The woman in the car is fucking *dead*. Oh, God, man, I can't shoot. I can't shoot like this. I gotta snap out of it. Jesus, I can't shoot until I calm down," Jake

said. He had stopped weeping but hadn't stopped shaking. His psyche was in shambles and Dave knew he needed rest if he was ever going to be able to kill one of those things.

Dave crawled back across the floor and grabbed the shotgun by the pistol grip. The shells on the sling made a soft metallic sound as they slid across the carpet. Dave picked up the weapon and brought it to his eyes. Turning the gun on its side, he pressed the lever bar and moved the pump half-way back toward himself. He eyed a shell in the chamber and closed the action. The extended mag tube under the short barrel held seven shells, and the one in the chamber made eight. The gun's measures were still in the old English system of inches and feet.

Dave returned to Jake's side and leaned back against the wall. Twelve-gauge sitting in his lap, he kept an eye on the window as Jake's shaking began to lessen. Neither of them moved for ten minutes, until a new sound entered the window from the street. Jake's eyes locked onto the window as all the muscles in his body tightened and his hands gripped big handfuls of carpet. Dave knew it was his turn to check out the noise, so he quietly duck-walked over to the window with his shotgun

ready in hand. Scared to death, he looked over the windowsill.

He saw the wrecked car he'd heard, and saw the blood and the dead woman. Except, the dead woman wasn't dead. She was clawing with her remaining arm at something in the back seat.

"Oh, Jesus, no," Dave barely choked out as he dropped the shotgun. The heavy weapon hit the carpet with a dull *thud*, and Dave scrambled to pick it up again. As he reached down for the shotgun, he spied the rifle lying on the floor where Jake had dropped it. Sick to his stomach, he reached for the scoped weapon. He stood up slowly and pointed it at the car.

Moving his cheek along the stock to find the right fit, he looked through the scope at the should-be-dead woman. Her crushed legs dangled behind her as she desperately attempted to drag herself with her one arm into the back seat. Dave could faintly make out her muffled groans of agony as she clawed at something in the back. He moved the scope a hair to the right, and his guts flipped inside his body.

Strapped into a pink car seat in the back of the car was a small baby. It made no audible sound, but

its face was scrunched in a crying expression as its tiny arms and legs squirmed helplessly against the tough nylon straps of the car seat. The woman, probably its mother, finally heaved herself close enough to grab its tiny leg by the ankle. With a violent yank, she pulled the infant to herself. Dave winced and pulled his eyes and the gun away from the window. He stumbled over to the garbage can by the bed and vomited. His hands death-gripped the rifle as he sobbed and wretched, and sweat gushed from his pores to join the plethora of fluids in the garbage can. Coughing his last, he turned to the wall to check on Jake. Jake was not there.

He stood silently by the window, watching mother eat child as if it were a *Discovery Channel* special. His conscious mind was asleep and resting, and his subconscious began to change and warp as it witnessed the hellish spectacle. It grew numb, as if part of his brain was dying off from sorrow and trauma. His breathing was steady and he didn't shake at all.

"Give me the rifle," he said with a saintly calm. His eyes never left the window. His left arm extended toward Dave, his hand open to receive the weapon. Dave took three awkward steps toward his friend and passed him the gun. Jake repositioned his feet

and, leaning across the desk, raised the rifle to his shoulder. His right hand briefly left the grip to insert his earplugs into his ears, only to return to the grip and gently finger the trigger.

“Plug your ears. This gun is loud,” Jake said. Dave groggily fell to one knee and jammed his fingers into his ears. He squinted his eyes and twitched with fear in anticipation of the imminent gunshot.

Jake gently rested the barrel on the windowsill and got comfortable. His breathing slowed even more. He didn’t move at all for a whole twenty seconds. Slowly his finger squeezed the trigger.

The report was a muffled *crack* accompanied by a modest recoil. Jake quickly reoriented and observed his target. His shot was true; a large hole now gaped in the woman’s head. His soft-tip bullet had caused satisfactory increased wounding, and the woman was now completely motionless. The baby, unfortunately, was no where to be seen and surely dead. No sound now came from the wrecked car across the street.

Jake lowered the rifle and closed the window. He walked casually to the bed and set the rifle down. He then turned and walked out of the room. Dave didn’t move, not wanting to abandon the imagined

safety of the spot he now occupied.

A moment later Jake reappeared. He held two beers in his hands. He opened one, put it in Dave's hand, and then resumed his comfortable spot against the wall.