

THIS

DARK



GRAB
YOUR



HEAD-
KNOCKER
AND



GET READY
FOR SOME



WET WORK
IN THE
MURDER-
HOLE

A
ZOMBIE
NOVEL

EARTH

JOHN HORNOR JACOBS

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Advance Praise for *THIS DARK EARTH*

“*The Road* meets *World War Z*, this book is a smart, thoughtful look at the end of humanity that delivers horrifying detail packed with an emotional resonance. Deftly written, with eloquent prose peppered with crisp, dark humor, Jacobs crafts a chillingly believable tale that transcends genre fiction.”

–S. G. Browne, author of *Breathers* and *Lucky Bastard*

“A savage gut-punch of a tale, lurching hell-bent to a spectacular showdown unparalleled in the zombie canon.”

–Sophie Littlefield, author of *Aftertime* and *Rebirth*

The land is **contaminated**, electronics are **defunct**, the **ravenous undead** remain, and life has fallen into a **nasty** and **brutish** state of nature.

Welcome to Bridge City, in what was once Arkansas: part medieval fortress, part Western outpost, and the precarious last stand for civilization. A ten-year-old prodigy when the world ended, Gus is now a battle-hardened young man. He designed Bridge City to protect the living few from the shamblers eternally at the gates. Now he's being groomed by his physician mother Lucy, and the gentle giant Knock-Out to become the next leader of men. But an army of slavers is on its way, and the war they'll wage for the city's resources could mean the end of mankind as we know it.

Can Gus become humanity's savior? And if so, will it mean becoming a dictator, a martyr . . . or maybe something far worse than even the zombies that plague the land?



JOHN HORNOR JACOBS was nominated for the Bram Stoker Award for his debut novel, *Southern Gods*, which *The Onion AV Club* called “sumptuous” and proclaimed “beautifully probes the eerie, horror-infested underbelly of the South.” Having worked in advertising for the past fifteen years, John is also an artist, a musician, and the cofounder of *Needle: A Magazine of Noir*. He lives in Little Rock, Arkansas. Follow him on Twitter at [@johnhornor](https://twitter.com/johnhornor), and read his lively ramblings—and check out an interactive map of Bridge City—at www.JohnHonorJacobs.com.



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Nominated for the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in a First Novel, John Hornor
Jacobs receives highest praise for *Southern Gods*

“A sumptuous Southern Gothic thriller . . . beautifully probes the eerie, horror-infested underbelly of the South.”

—*The Onion AV Club*

“A brilliant, smartly-written horror-noir novel.”

—**Brian Keene, Bram Stoker Award–winning author of *The Rise***

“The prologue to this exceptional novel is one of the most terrifying things I have ever shivered through. It will kiss your paltry soul with fear. . . . Great Yuggoth, what a great debut novel!”

—**W. H. Pugmire, author of *The Tangled Muse***

“A bit of H. P. Lovecraft, a touch of William Hjortsberg. . . . John Hornor Jacobs will turn heads with this debut.”

—**Laird Barron, Shirley Jackson Award–winning author of *Occultation***

“Fantastic . . . both terrifying and beautiful.”

—**Stephen Blackmoore, author of *City of the Living Dead***

“A true Lovecraftian nightmare—not for the faint of heart! Powerful, horrific, and beautiful.”

—**Adam Christopher, author of *Empire State***

“Compulsively readable and definitely memorable.”

—**Gary A. Braunbeck, five-time Bram Stoker Award–winning author of *Coffin County***

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THIS DARK EARTH



JOHN HORNOR JACOBS

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*For my whole fam-damil
especially Kendall, Lily, Helen, and Cook*

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The race of man, while sheep in credulity, are wolves for conformity

—*Carl van Doren*

I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks
and stones

—*Albert Einstein*

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GENESIS

It was a family, once, Lucy saw. And maybe they fit together like puzzle pieces when whole, mother and father pressed together, the boy nestled between them. But now they were broken, a thin gibbering wall coming from the child thrashing on the hospital floor, the mother frantic and pawing at his narrow chest, choking up sobs in great heaves, grappling for his flailing arms, while the father stood helplessly, opening and closing his hands into fists as if wishing for something to fight.

“Help me.” It wasn’t a scream, but more alarming because of the lowered tone and urgency of the woman. The man dropped to his knees and took the boy’s wrists in his big, rawboned hands. He was a laborer, that was clear, black haired and thick of waist. The boy shared his looks, dark hair, and sturdy build from what Lucy could see beyond the wreckage of the young face.

Lucy stepped closer. The child had swallowed his own lips and was now trying to gnaw off his fingers. She paused to set down her coffee on the nurses’ station and then moved toward the grisly trio.

“Cathy!” Lucy bellowed, using her most commanding voice to be heard over the boy’s gibbers. She’d been walking past the admittance ward, headed back to the microscope for her morning slides, when she’d heard the commotion.

“Hold on, damn it,” a voice came from behind a partition.

The father grunted, cords standing out on his arms as he gripped the boy’s wrists tight to try to keep them away from the lipless, snapping jaws.

Cathy prairie-dogged up, spied Lucy, and ducked back down. Then she appeared around the corner carrying a first-aid kit, a packaged syringe, and a bottle.

The boy’s heart hammered away inside his rib cage, pushing tachycardia, and Lucy could feel the heat of his fever even before she touched him. She checked his pulse: 120 bpm or thereabouts. Hard to tell with him jittering in her grasp. He looked to be seven or eight years old, judging by size, strength, and muscle tone.

“I hope that’s a sedative you’re holding. This kid is out of control, Cath.”

Cathy frowned at her, then glanced at the mother and father.

Lucy winced.

The boy whipped his head around, slinging fine blood droplets, and sank his teeth into his father’s wrist. The man bellowed like an ox and tried to yank his arm away but only succeeded in pulling the child up from the floor.

Lucy struggled to prize the child’s jaws open, but he was latched on like a pit bull.

She turned and ripped the purse from the mother’s shoulder.

“What are you doing?” The woman’s eyes were wide.

Lucy put one hand on the boy’s forehead and shoved his head down onto the tiles. At the sharp *crack* of impact, his mouth opened, releasing the man’s mangled wrist. Lucy stuffed the purse straps into the child’s mouth and reflexively he clamped down hard and groaned. Cathy, falling to her knees, sank a needle into his arm. He arched his back, bowing up and off the floor, slobbered and growled through the bit, and then relaxed.

The father slumped to the side, cradling his injured arm. The mother sobbed. Cathy reached out to the child's mother, making comforting sounds.

Lucy stood and looked around. Another mother and child and an elderly couple were staring at her as she had attacked the boy. As if she was some kind of monster.

This is why I don't do wet work, she thought. My bedside manner sucks.

Lucy felt an overwhelming need to leave. She forced herself to wait until Cathy had bandaged the child's hands and done triage on what was left of his lips. Reconstructive surgery was going to work middling best.

On her way out, Lucy retrieved her coffee. It was still warm.

Lucy loved cancer.

She loved the problems, the puzzles, the mystery of the disease, its pure viciousness and its strange recursive paths and tactics. It was a formidable opponent, and she respected it, in all its myriad forms.

Brushing hair from her face, Lucy leaned over the microscope and placed her eye to the ocular.

Purple foam of dotted circles: renal carcinoma. Black sky strewn with spider-shaped stars: probable sarcoma. A surf of sea-blue histocytes: classic chronic myeloproliferative leukemia—CML for short.

The zebra of the bunch showed bloody aspirate with no bony spicules, looking for all the world like the Cassiopeia constellation. Lucy took her time. She rechecked the chart. Twenty-seven, female, pregnant. The woman had smiled nervously at Lucy during the biopsy despite Lucy's scowl and the needle burrowing into her flesh. She had brown eyes, Lucy remembered, and a little crook to her smile pulling her lip down. Her stomach was just beginning to pooch. She looked nice and maybe in a different world, if Lucy had been a different person, the two of them would have been friends.

But Lucy didn't really have friends. She had a husband, Fred, and a child, Gus. And an electron microscope.

Look at the human body. Break it down into component parts. Skull, mandible, vertebrae snaking down between scapula and clavicle to the pelvis. Wreath that structure in a rich integument of flesh, muscle and sinew, and connective tissue wrapped around delicate, intricate organs that moved vital fluids about the body. *Raise your hand and flex your fingers, she thought, eye to ocular, and a million little exchanges with the chemical machine of your body result.* She raised her hand and adjusted the magnification of the microscope. The zebra was puzzling.

The mystery of the body, she thought, and didn't know if she was referring to the human body or the humans themselves. Easier to focus on the puzzles that she could solve, rather than those she couldn't. Focus, she thought as she twisted a knob on the microscope, causing a spray of cells in her vision to blossom and calcify.

For an instant, she thought back to the boy from earlier in the morning, spasming on the floor, lips and fingertips eaten away. There was a terrible look on the mother's face, one Lucy didn't think she'd ever seen before in all her years of medicine, and it was a great blank wall to her, beyond her understanding. A family in wreckage . . . Easier to think on the boy's affliction. An ugly reality, to be sure, and puzzling too. What could've caused that behavior? What if that had been Gus?

She leaned back from the microscope's viewfinder and allowed herself a moment to let her eyes rest. To think upon the boy on the floor.

She checked the slide again. The spray of stars showed her things that no astrologer could perceive, and she felt, for just an instant, an intense moment of joy as she discerned the nature of their arrangement, the problem solved. No doubt about it, mature B cell neoplasm. Packed marrow. *Cancer, you old devil, come visit here again.* Then the realization that always followed, like guilt after masturbation, that the cancerous

cells didn't exist solely on a microscope slide. They had been part of a greater whole, once. She'd removed them from a woman. A woman with nice hair, a wedding band, a crooked smile, and a maternity clothing catalogue peeking from her purse.

How do you tell a patient that her child will never be born? Due to her cancer, she'll miscarry far before term?

Delicately.

Which presented a problem for Lucy. For delicacy, she relied on residents. She was the brain. Let the hands give comfort. Let the mouths speak platitudes, impart the bad news, and soften the blow.

Lucy leaned back and rubbed her eyes.

As she made her notations on the chart of the woman with Burkitt lymphoma, Dr. Robbins poked his head into her office.

"I need you to help us, Lucy. It's all hands on deck," he said, blinking. She winced at the sailing reference. "The waiting room's going mad, just packed to the gills."

Lucy tucked a wild strand of hair behind her ear and said, "So, what else is new?"

"Right. It's always a madhouse. But this is different, Luce. Something strange is going on." He bit his lip and she thought of the boy again.

"Okay." The rack of samples could wait.

In the hall, Robbins walked with his hands in his pockets, his head bowed.

"So what's up?" Lucy asked. She wasn't used to having to prod Robbins. A pediatrician, he had florid cheeks and, usually, a jovial disposition.

"There's something going on and I think—"

Robbins looked up and Lucy saw concern etched into his face. His clothes were disheveled and his face showed two days' growth of beard. This was SOP, but he usually smiled.

"The stockpile—"

"What about it?"

"Why are we here?" he asked. His voice stayed soft, but she could still hear the stress rippling through him. "We're here because this town grew up around the chemical stockpile. And the adjacent military base. We're in the poorest county in America, maybe—definitely one of the poorest in Arkansas. With most of its population either in the military or feeding off of it."

Lucy shrugged. "I don't understand what you're talking about, Robby. You're not making sense."

He frowned and squared his shoulders.

"Let's go to the waiting room and I'll show you."

He turned and walked away, shoes clacking on the virulent green tiles, into the wash of light from the window. She jogged to catch up.

She had almost rejoined him when they neared the double doors that served as a barrier between reception, atrium, the waiting room, and the rest of the clinic. Through the metal and plastic of the doors sounded the screaming of adults, the cries of children.

Robbins popped the circular metal button on the wall and the double doors swung open with a hiss.

The noise was deafening. Lucy's step faltered.

People lay strewn everywhere. Mothers huddled in plastic chairs and clutched squalling babes. Old men cursed and scowled. Women cried and children screamed in pain. At least two elderly lay upon the cheap gum-spotted carpet.

The waiting room was a menagerie of neurological errata and dysfunction. When Lucy was younger, interning in the psychiatric ward of the state hospital, the chief resident had sung "Dysfunction Junction" to the tune of the old Saturday morning cartoon "Conjunction Junction." He would've been howling now.

The receptionists had shut the receiving windows and were hiding in the office, as far as Lucy could tell. ~~Two orderlies grappled with an older man whose arms shook and rippled with muscle tremors as he bellowed curses.~~ Cathy and Melissa, a high-school volunteer, walked through the room, handing out forms to those able to hold them.

Closer to Lucy, a male barked, then grunted. She turned to look.

An elderly man on the floor contorted his back into a painful half-moon, only his head and heels touching the floor. His fists were balled and pressed into his thighs. *Opisthotonus*. Lucy had seen this in textbooks but never in person. Tetanus could bring on such dramatic contortions.

A gray-haired woman sat near the man, looking away from his horrible position. She spoke in a low, urgent voice.

“Shit on me. Crap in my hair. Dogshit. Sucking cock. Cum-gargling. Assfuck. Christfuck. Virginwhore. Godquim—”

A boy stood stock still in the center of the room. Every muscle of his body was contracted, locking him into an almost farcical position: one arm out, halfway extended, hand closed and palm up, the other grasping his side. He looked as though he might begin fencing.

A black girl no more than ten thrashed on the floor, spasming and foaming at the mouth. Her hands trembled, leaving red curlicues on the carpet. Her mother stood above her, wringing her hands, as the father pressed himself against her in a feeble attempt to smother the spasms. The girl brought red-tipped fingers to her mouth and began to bite.

Whatever that boy had this morning, it's catching.

“Please, Doctor. Help my baby, she won't stop crying.”

Someone tugged on Lucy's sleeve. She turned to look. A woman with a swaddled babe in her arms and Robbins approached.

“Jesus Christ, Robby.” Lucy felt at her pockets, helplessly, as if something there might help her. “Self-harm. Ingestion. Self-violence. Spasms and seizures. It's like all of the big weird neurological baddies have manifested themselves in our waiting room.”

“Doctor?” The woman's voice was desperate, lost and urgent. “Please help my baby.”

She looked at Lucy with wide, clear eyes. The child screamed, a high-pitched ululation, and then stuffed its hand into its mouth.

“Come with me,” Lucy said.

With mother and child in tow, Lucy pushed her way through the crowd. As Lucy passed, a tottering old lady flopped to the floor, and each limb began to twitch independently of the others, as if the woman's body had suffered a schizophrenic break.

Choreoathetosis, Lucy noted. *Another one.*

They ducked into a waiting room. Robbins locked the door and led the woman to a cushioned examination table. She set her child down and removed the blanket.

“What's her name?” Robbins asked softly.

“Deborah. We call her Deb.”

“Age?”

“Six months.”

“What's wrong with her? Fever? Crying?”

The woman nodded.

Robby said, “What made you bring her in?”

“She was shaking. She started crying and her legs and arms just started to . . . I don't know . . . vibrate.”

“She cough or choke?”

“Coughed, maybe. I think.” She was a short woman, heavysset like most of the folk around White Ha with originally brown hair done up into a confectioner’s mess, bleached and highlighted. She had French nails with designs applied to them and cheap jewelry, two rings, a necklace, and large, tacky earrings. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes and she wiped them away, smearing mascara. “I don’t know. She spat up her milk.” Her hands shook and she rubbed her face. Not much sleep recently. “What is going on? Why everyone out there?”

“I don’t know,” Lucy said. “But I intend to find out what’s wrong with your baby.”

The mother showed her teeth to Lucy. Lucy realized it was the woman’s attempt at a smile.

She peeled away the child’s clothes and diaper.

With the baby nude, pink, and splayed upon the paper-wrapped examination table, Lucy felt a twinge of nostalgia for Gus at that age. When he was just a baby, she felt such love suffusing her, she found herself speechless when she held him. And she was content to stay in that speechless state beyond thought or reason. Just pure emotion. But as he grew and took his first steps, his first stabs at speech and then abstract ideas, she had such problems with his ignorance that, to her shame, she let Fred commandeer the child’s upbringing. After all, she was the breadwinner. Why not have Fred raise Gus?

Without Fred, she’d have been lost. He guided both her and Gus through those rough waters.

This child was wonderfully plump and apparently healthy, despite being flushed with fever. She had a thick head of amber hair and blue eyes, now narrowed in pain. Her tiny fists waved in the air, angry.

Lucy pulled the diaper tabs to examine the child’s genitalia and take her temperature.

“Hold the phone.” She held up the diaper, heavy and wet. “Robby. You see this?”

“What is it?”

Turning, Lucy moved the diaper into the light.

“Her urine looks orange.”

Robbins washed his hands in the examination room sink, rubbed them with antibacterial foam, and then listened to the baby’s heart and took her pulse.

“Tachycardia. One hundred and thirty beats per minute. And rising. She’s a hummingbird.”

Lucy turned to the mother—her hand covering her mouth in disbelief or pure horror, Lucy couldn’t tell.

“Robby, you going be okay here? I’ve got to take this to the lab. No infant gets gout.”

Robbins nodded absentmindedly and continued examining the infant.

A crash rattled the frosted-glass window. Booming male voices sounded from the waiting room. The screams.

“Robby, lock the door behind me, okay?”

“Will do.” He didn’t look up from the child.

Lucy removed the white doctor’s coat and unpinned her long brown hair. She wrapped the diaper into a ball and reconnected the tabs, saying, “I hope you have another one.” Immediately afterward she realized how that must sound and hoped the mother knew she meant another diaper, not another child.

Maybe that’s just the way my fucked-up mind works.

The woman gave a pained nod.

Lucy opened the door as quickly as she could and stepped out into bedlam.

“Oh, shit,” she whispered to no one.

The older man who’d suffered the spine-cracking episode of opisthotonus lay unbowed. But the boy still stood in the fencing position, and it looked as if the girl who’d been thrashing about on the floor had chewed off her lips. Cathy mopped at the child’s face with cotton, a bottle of antiseptic clutched in the opposite fist. Dr. Patel leaned over her, injecting something—most likely benzodiazepine—into the girl’s arm.

Lucy moved across the room to the contortionist. The woman sitting near him continued to curse, staring unblinking at the plastic ficus tree in the corner.

Lucy knelt and searched for a pulse. The loose skin of his neck made it hard to find. It was weak and fluttery. She opened his eyelids.

Pupils nonresponsive.

Turning his head, she noticed an orange smear on the man's earlobe. Without anything to take a sample with, she reached into her pocket and found her house keys. She dug into the man's ear, scraping away some of the orange substance.

"What're you doing, *bitch*?" A deep voice, close, behind her.

Lucy turned. Another elderly man stood over her. Liver spots ran up his arms and disappeared into the sleeves of a plaid shirt. He had the look of a withered eagle chick, bulbous head with wispy white hair perched precariously atop a thin, wattled neck. He was rangy and lean, if doddering, with oversized joints due either to arthritis or to unfortunate genetics. His lips drew back from dentures; his hands were ballooned into knobby, furious fists.

This isn't going to go well.

Still crouching, Lucy lurched forward, putting her shoulder into the man's groin. Knocked off balance, he howled and fell down hard on his ass. His hands jittered.

"Cunt! Rip your tits off!" His body shuddered and then he emitted a strange sound. "*Eurppp!*"

She rose, leaping forward, and dashed to the pneumatic doors.

She swiped her key card across the sensor plate, waited breathlessly while the doors swung open, and sprinted through.

In her office, she locked the door and felt intense relief that there were no glass windows, frosted or otherwise, in her workspace. Just a solid-core door with the placard Pathology to its right.

She set the diaper and her keys down next to the microscope. Hastily, she popped open a case of slides and, taking a swab from a glass container, began preparing them. No time to formalin fix the specimens.

She slipped the infant's specimen into the scope, centered it in the viewfinder, and adjusted the ocular and focus.

Bright orange crystals filled her vision, like an airburst over a crowd on the Fourth of July. An explosion of light and color.

Hyperuricemia. Too much urea for the body to handle. She's sloughing off the excess through her urine.

She prepared another slide, this time from the old man's sample on her keys.

Another bright explosion of color against her retina. A field of orange crystals.

Urea coming from his ears? That's bizarre.

She turned to the computer, to the diagnostic database, and placed her cursor in the search form field.

She thought for a moment, then began to type.

Hyperuricemia, for the uric residue in the diaper and around the ears. *Coprolalia*, for the involuntary cursing. *Choreoathetosis*, for the spastic movements. *Opisthotonus*, for the spine-cracker. *Dystonia*, for the bobbing in the fencing position.

She jabbed at the return key. The search results filtered onto her screen.

Three hits: progressive supranuclear palsy, drug-induced acute dystonia reaction, or Lesch-Nyhan syndrome.

What the hell is Lesch-Nyhan syndrome? I've never heard of it.

She clicked through, and, as she read, her stomach began to twist and ball into a painful knot. She turned, dug through her purse, and found a flat package of Marlboro Lights. A secret shame, smoking. She knew if her colleagues found out, she'd be ridden about it for months. She fished out a cigarette and lit

with a match from a book tucked into the pack's cellophane.

Lucy took her time, drawing the hot cigarette smoke into her lungs and expelling it toward the ceiling a blue cloud as she reread everything. The nicotine calmed her. She'd be good for the next few hours or so. And now, knowing what she did, it might be a long time before she'd get another smoke.

When she was through, she dropped the cigarette to the tile floor and ground it out.

She wiped off her house keys and pushed them deep into her pocket.

Then she turned to the cabinets and rifled through them. She withdrew swabs, ethyl alcohol. She found gauze and tape and cotton and swept them all into her purse. She considered trying to break into the drug storage but realized she'd need a chainsaw to get through the door. No drugs. She'd have to make do.

With her purse full, she slung it over her shoulder and then opened the drawer holding her needle gun. The big one for aspirating tissue. She took the package of extra needles, placed them in her purse, and held the gun by the handle, form fitted to her hand. She held a five-inch sliver of steel in her fist that could easily be used in self-defense.

She turned and headed back to Robbins.

The waiting room was quieter now, which made Lucy nervous.

The woman had stopped cursing and the belligerent old coot who'd called her a cunt was nowhere to be seen. Cathy and Melissa handed out bottles of water. A woman nursed her baby, frowning.

The man who'd suffered from opisthotonus was still on the floor.

Lucy went to him and knelt. His lips were gone, along with his fingertips. He must've come to when she'd been in Pathology and begun eating himself. She shivered.

Okay. Today is officially fucked up.

She felt for a pulse. None. His eyes stared unblinking at the buzzing fluorescent tube above.

"Cathy!" The nurse looked up and trotted over on white, cushy shoes. She knelt beside Lucy, smelling of Mentholatum.

"This man is dead, Cath."

Cathy covered her mouth with a trembling hand. "Oh, no. This is—"

"Listen to me, will you? Just listen." She cleared her throat. "I'm not exactly sure, but I've analyzed some samples from this man and an infant, and I think they both have the same thing. There's no way for me to be absolutely positive without a genetic test, but that isn't going to happen in the next couple of hours. I need you to lock the entrance doors—now. Send someone to check the other exits."

"What? Lock the doors?"

"Yes. Lock them. This might get worse; it looks infectious, and we've got to take care of the people here. If I'm right—"

"Right about what?"

Lucy wanted another cigarette. "I don't know yet," she said. "But clearly, it's infectious, and those that contract it are dangerous." She thought about the withered geezer who called her a cunt. "Those that contract it are dangerous. We've got to go on lockdown."

Cathy put her hand to her mouth again, as if to stifle some exclamation. She had soft white palms and each plump finger ended in a pink, shiny nail. Kind hands. A healer's hands.

"Just do it, will you? Lock the doors." She stopped. Tried to smile. Failed, maybe. Maybe not.

The nurse nodded. "Okay."

Lucy stood and walked to the examination room. As she entered, she saw the mother huddled in the corner, crying. Robbins sat in a plastic chair with an unfocused look. He stared up at the fluorescent light, pushing his lips in and out while rubbing his chin. The baby lay on the table, unmoving, tinged blue gray.

"Oh no."

The mother drew her knees to her chin and moaned.

“My baby. My baby . . .”

Lucy set down the tissue-aspirating needle and seated herself on the physician’s stool in front of Robbins.

“Robby,” she said in a low voice. “Whatever this is . . . It’s totally bizarre. I analyzed the orange crystals

from . . .” Lucy glanced at the mother.

He wasn’t listening. Lucy touched his knee; he blinked and looked at her.

“This is not a good situation, Luce.” He tilted his head at the woman grieving for her child.

“What these people have could be Lesch-Nyhan syndrome. It’s very rare and triggers on the chromosome.”

“Lesch-Nyhan? I’ve . . . that sounds familiar. But it’s almost unheard of. And . . . let’s see . . .” His eyes unfocused as he looked at the wall, his gaze moving back and forth between two invisible points, searching.

“It only occurs prenatally.”

“Yes. Caused by a deficiency of hypoxanthine-guanine phosphoribosyltransferase activity. An inborn error of purine metabolism associated with uric acid overproduction and a continuum spectrum of neurologic manifestations depending on the degree of the enzymatic deficiency.” Almost like being in med school again, the recitation of symptoms. She’d always been strong in school.

She took a long breath, opened her eyes, and looked at Robby, ticking off symptoms on her fingers. “Lithiasis and gout. Neurological manifestations, including severe action dystonia, choreoathetosis, ballismus, cognitive and attention deficit, and self-injurious behavior—everything we’ve witnessed. All you’ve got to do is peek out in the waiting room to see it all. But what I can’t figure out is *why*. Or how. She balled her hand into a fist and ground it into her thigh. Lucy felt infected by the mystery of the thing. It was a puzzle, and it needed to be solved.

“Wait. Did you say Y chromosome? Then . . . then how could this child have had it? She was female.”

Hearing the past-tense usage, the mother wailed again and began pulling her hair and shaking her head. Robbins winced at the sound. Lucy found it hard to concentrate, and for a moment, despite full knowledge of the woman’s terrible loss, Lucy just wished she’d shut up so she could think. So she could figure out the problem. Followed swiftly by an intense flush of shame for feeling that way.

“Do you have anything for her, Robby? The mother?”

Sedatives.

“No. These examination rooms are bare. And it can’t be Lesch-Nyhan. That only occurs in boys.”

Lucy shook her head, irritated. She threw up her hands and said, “Shit. I don’t know.”

“I’ve read about knockout gene therapy where you can take a viral vector, like adenovirus, and carry a ‘suicide gene’ to a target, render it inert, and induce a disease.”

“You’re talking biological warfare.” She looked around for a moment, helpless, and stuck her hands into her pockets. “How could this have happened? There’s got to be a more rational explanation for this.”

“You’re right. It’s too much. It’s science fiction. And the government wouldn’t ever be that careless—”

Lucy snorted. “I never would’ve pegged you for a romantic, but sure as shit . . .” She felt horrible about saying it the second it came out of her mouth. In a constant state of abrasion, chapping asses, and rubbing people the wrong way. For a moment, Lucy recalled her exit interview at Baptist Hospital in Little Rock. The head pathologist, neatly ensconced behind his massive desk, had raised his meaty hands like a priest for benediction, looked at her sadly, and simply stated, *We’d like you to start pursuing other opportunities. You’re just not a good fit here, Lucy. We need someone who plays well with others.* She had stood and kicked away her chair, slamming a fist down onto his desk. He had jumped and leaned away from her. *I’m a scientist, Jerry. Not a goddamned kindergartener. You can fuck right off.* She regretted the last bit, for truth, but very little else about her stint there.

She sighed, at her past failures or for the looming mystery of whatever this disease was, she couldn't say. ~~"We can't know its origin. The fact we're right next to a chemical stockpile just clouds the issue. It could be from anywhere and already moving into pandemic stage. No way to tell. But what does it matter? It's happening. And we have to find out what it is and how to treat it."~~

"Lucy. Luce. Hold on a second. Listen to what you've just said. There's a biological agent loose. We've got to go. This place is going to get very ugly, very soon."

"Leave? We have to treat these people. We have to solve this—"

"Shoot 'em full of sedatives. Then we run. The children with Lesch-Nyhan need restraints all their life. Most of these folks are adults. It's quiet now, but it's about to be a psychopath's wet dream out there." He moved to the door. She was actually startled when he put his ear to the glass to listen. "And I need to get home to Rachel. To my girls."

From the corner of her eye, Lucy noticed a motion on the table. She turned and gaped. The infant moved sluggishly.

"Robby. The baby."

The mother pushed herself into a standing position, using the wall as a brace.

"Deb!" She lunged forward and huddled over the infant, tears falling on blue skin.

"Mrs. . . ." Lucy realized she didn't know the woman's name. "Please let me examine your baby."

The baby waved her arms, opening and closing her mouth. In death, or what had seemed to be death, her eyes had glazed over, but they focused on the woman now.

"My baby isn't dead. But so cold—"

"Ma'am, please."

Robby whispered, "You witnessed the tachycardia. Her heart gave out. I watched it happen. This child was dead."

The infant squirmed and the mother gave her her hand in comfort. The baby grabbed the proffered finger and stuffed it into her mouth.

The mother said, "She's teething. It's really been hurting her lately. Rubbing her gums helps."

"What's your name, honey?" Lucy asked, remembering Cathy with the mother this morning.

For a moment she looked as if she didn't know herself. "Martha."

"Martha, make room. Please. I need to examine Deb."

Lucy turned, began to snatch for Robbins's stethoscope, then stopped herself and pointed at the device hanging from his neck. He blinked, then gave it to her. Lucy pressed it to the infant's chest and listened for heartbeat. Nothing. She pulled back the blankets covering the infant's legs, grabbed the thermometer, and took the child's temperature anally. The baby didn't flinch.

Eighty-five degrees Fahrenheit. And dropping. Like a cooling corpse.

Yet the infant moved.

Martha winced and pulled her hand from the child's mouth. Blood crowned the tip of her finger and beaded down the side in a long rivulet. It made a soft *pat-pat* sound as it dripped to paper on the table. The baby half screamed, half moaned.

Lucy turned to Robbins. "What is going on here, Robby? This goes way beyond biological warfare."

He shook his head. "I have no fucking clue."

"This child is dead."

Martha frowned at Lucy but remained silent. She glanced at the blood-smeared mouth of her child.

A thump sounded as something heavy hit the door. The frosted-glass window cracked.

Robby said, "It's time to get out of here, Luce."

"Hold on a moment. I want to take some blood and another crystal sample. See here? She's got it in her

ears as well as her diaper, which means—”

~~Something slammed into the door again, and the window went white with small fractures. Another blow and it would be gone.~~

Lucy removed a Vacutainer for drawing blood from its wrapper and moved to the examination room cabinets to get alcohol and a swab.

“Luce. This is absurd.”

She ignored him. *It's an infant, so I should use a finger stick, but . . . Christ, the thing has no pulse! I have to use the Vacutainer.*

“Lucy.”

The child seemed even cooler when she swabbed the crook of her arm with the alcohol-soaked cotton. As she placed the needle close to the child's skin, Robby said, “Goddamn it, Lucy. Wake up!”

He grabbed her shoulder and spun her around.

“Martha, get your child,” Robby said, shifting his gaze away from Lucy for just an instant and then turning back to her. “Enough, Luce. It's time to start thinking bigger.”

Martha moved to the table and gently reswaddled her girl. Hands trembling, she kissed the baby's forehead.

“Bigger?”

“It's contagious, that much is certain, whatever this is. We've got to think about our families.”

“Call Rachel.”

Robby dug a cell phone from his pocket and dialed. Lucy watched him as he listened. Eventually, he shook his head and his expression grew even more grim. “Network busy,” he said.

“So we still don't know anything.”

A scream came from outside the door, a scream beyond anything she'd ever heard. The sound was half rage, half pain, like some pig sent to the slaughter, still alive before having the skin stripped from it. It was a sound that defied education, went beyond learning, and affected her on a physiological level. Her skin prickled, her muscles tensed. She was watching Robby when the sound came. Lucy noted his pupils dilating, marked his increase in breathing and the flushed quality of his skin. Heart rate up, increased blood flow. Her body was preparing to fight. Or flee. Once again, it struck her as strange how her mind could still switch from the analytical, even in the worst situations.

She looked down at her hands, the Vacutainer and cotton-swab now looking so helpless and feeble against the mounting tide of mysteries, of questions she'd never be able to answer, puzzles she'd never be able to solve.

“Okay.” She shook her head, half to clear it, half to come to grips with what was going to come next. She took a deep breath and said, “You're right. We have to go.”

Robby gave a little manic laugh. The stress was visible in his posture, his expression. “I realize how hard that is for you to admit, Luce. So I won't rub it in. How do you want to do this?”

Lucy grabbed her needle gun. She raised an eyebrow at Robby. “I say we go out the back way near the employee parking lot.”

Robbins checked his pockets. He pulled out his keys.

From the waiting room, a sound of shattering glass reverberated through the building. The door rattled in its frame. Martha whimpered and pressed Deb close to her chest.

“Okay.” Lucy held up the big needle for aspirating tissue and looked at her companions. “Quickly, right? You ready?” At Robby's nod and Martha's terrified blinking, Lucy jerked open the door and stepped into the waiting room.

The contortionist stood, swaying, in front of her. Blood dripped from his lower lip, and he turned dull, milky eyes toward Lucy. He took a step forward, raising his arms.

“Go! Go!” she yelled. Robbins and Martha dashed behind her, moving toward the automatic doors.

~~Attention fixed on Lucy, the contortionist let the others pass. Lurching forward, he grabbed her arm~~
opened his mouth, and tilted his head as if to bite her face.

This is not happening.

She twisted in his grasp, but the man drew her closer with astonishingly strong hands. His mouth gaped.

Oh no, you don't.

She was surprised at her own strength. She wrenched herself away and stepped back to get more space. Then, as if she was throwing a punch, she dipped her knees, flexed, and shot her fist outward, toward his face. He didn't flinch or dodge.

It's as if he's lost all reflex . . . All his autonomic functions are suppressed. Nonexistent, maybe.

The needle went through his eye, into the brain, more easily than she thought possible. The haft popped through the sclera and crushed the vitreous fluid from the eyeball. The needle jutted from the ocular cavity. The contortionist fell backward, pawing at the handle of the needle. He flopped to the floor, squirmed, then stilled.

How horrible, to die twice in a single day.

Looking beyond him, Lucy saw the waiting room had turned bloody during her palaver with Robbins and Martha. The foul-mouthed old lady with the religious bent shuffled slowly past the fake ficus and turned toward Lucy. Again, milky eyes glared at her. Lucy couldn't pin it down exactly, but there didn't seem to be any awareness in those eyes. It was as if some deep-sea creature felt eddies and currents spun off a passing fish and moved to attack, working on pure instinct.

She can smell, maybe. Hear sound or feel the vibrations of air. The eyes don't move in the sockets, they don't track. But she knows I'm here. The glassiness would occlude sight somewhat. If she can see me, I'm very blurry.

The woman lurched forward. Her legs and arms seemed to tremor still.

For a moment, Lucy stood paralyzed. The sight of the woman, half of her face missing and the entire left side of her front covered in blood, locked her in place.

“Lucy!” Robbins's voice came from her left. “The doors are open. Come on.”

Everything happened at once. The clinic's front door exploded inward, billowing smoke. The explosion knocked Lucy sideways, toward Robbins and Martha. Her head smacked against the wall and the world went white and then tilted horribly as she fell.

When she sat up, men in black military garb poured through the husk of doorway, wearing masks that obscured their faces, their weapons raised. Lucy made herself move. Pushing at the floor with her hands, she scrambled to her feet, head spinning, and threw herself after Robbins. The back doors began to close just as she passed through.

Behind her, a cacophony of gunfire ripped through the smoke, and she felt more than sensed the harmless motes of bullets filling the air around her. Something spun off Lucy's skull, and she pitched forward onto the tile floor.

The doors behind her closed seconds after she saw the soldiers begin shooting people in the waiting room, but not before she saw one of the patients lurch toward a figure in black, knock his gun aside, and drag him to the floor. Bullets ripped through the bloody old woman, yet she didn't fall. She lurched and turned toward her attacker.

It wasn't until bullets began ripping through the door that Lucy forced herself up again. The screams grew louder, the gunfire wilder and more frantic.

Tracers swam in the corners of her vision, and she found her body responding sluggishly to her own commands.

Robbins and Martha had already disappeared down the hall, and Lucy nearly bowled over Martha as she

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