

O n G o o d A u t h o r i t y

Peri Dwyer Worrell

* * *

Eufala, Alabama 02/19/2053

“Dr. Totter, may I speak with you about the security measures for your trip?” Zane, bearded, muscular, was poised and looming over her, and she fought the urge to take a step backwards.

Vivian Totter looked over her shoulder at the lookout tower’s viewing window. “So, you tracked me down!” She turned from the view of the no-man’s land between the concertina-wire fences to face him. She’d always loved taking a birds-eye view this way. “I was just taking a few minutes’ alone time. So much has happened since the vaccine tested out.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Zane drawled courteously. He shook her soft doctor’s hand with his hard warrior’s one. “It’s a great thing you did. Wiping out the zombie virus for good!” He grinned, quirked smile blooming through his blonde beard like a wild spring crocus, appealing in such a seeming brute of a man.

Vivian’s chest swelled with pride, restrained in favor of humility. There were still so many possible slip-ups! But if they could get enough

people vaccinated to build herd immunity, there would come a day, in her lifetime, when no one would ever have to watch a loved one turn into a flesh-eating zombie again.

“We’ve got a long way to go before that happens,” Vivian said, “As the transmission chain’s broken, there’ll still be a lot of infected subjects to hunt down.” She tilted her chin at the wall of hirsute human muscle standing before her. “There’ll be work for people like you for a long time to come.”

Zane preened ever so slightly under her glance and she found herself swallowing hard. His searching awareness demanded she lock gazes with his blue eyes.

He blinked, moment over, smiled deferentially. “Have you traveled in the armored units before?”

“Short distances.”

Zane briefed her in his tranquil drawl: “They’re not too comfortable, for sure. But they *are* safe. As for the threats we’ll be facing: It’s important that we all stay alert. Even though, with the vaccine, almost no new ones are converting, they still live three years.” He tensed and added, “--As I’m sure you know!”

“That’s right. Three years, more or less.” She nodded.

He relaxed back into his authority. “And everyone within about sixty miles of here has been vaccinated, so there’ve been no new infections. It’s a beautiful thing, Dr. Totter,” he said. “They’re fading away, slowly but surely.” His voice jittered with barely contained excitement. “But, as we get outside that sixty-mile radius we’ll start running into deaders again...thick. We’ll be four cars,” he continued, “first and last car, armed security, the second you and your grandmother. Umm, Doctor Totter, are you sure you want her to come with? It’s not gonna be easy. The roads are damn rough and we may have to go a while between food and, er, bathroom breaks. There could be some engagements with

zombies. It could be really unpleasant.”

Vivian chuckled. “I won’t tell her she can’t go, and I’m willing to bet you don’t want to, either! Grandma’s pretty spry for 75. We’ll cushion her seat real well, and she’s already rigged up a diaper for herself. She eats like a bird. As for ‘unpleasant,’ Grandma got me and my ma out of Huntsville and into this compound safely when the shit hit the fan back in ‘23. I’m willing to bet she could tell some stories might scare even you!”

He put his hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay, just making sure. Anyway, it’ll take about four hours to reach our first waypoint.”

Zane opened the door and stood back to let her descend the watchtower steps. She didn’t look to see if he was watching her body from behind--too disappointing if he wasn’t. Ever since the vaccine had passed its quick-and-dirty clinical trial (n = everyone in Eufala), people had begun to defer to her authority, and she wasn’t used to it. She was barely used to being in charge of the medical team at the compound since Ralph retired: two other doctors, six nurses, and herself. The only one of the lot who’d been to actual medical school was Ralph, now approaching 80; he’d trained both her and her colleague Dillon. That was the norm nowadays; the population centers that supported big universities and teaching hospitals just didn’t exist any longer. Which made it even more critical that Viv’s new vaccine could be synthesized easily in a minimal micro lab, which most of the enclaves had.

The two of them emerged together from the darkness of the tower, blinking in the sunlight. “Jed and Cindy,” he nodded at an athletic young couple nearby, “will be riding with you. Jeff and me, we’ll be in the third car with the mayor’s aide and her wife. Samuel and Dan will be taking point and Tom and Tyler will bring up the rear.” He pointed out four well-armed, sturdy, young men loitering about near the watchtower.

“Sounds good. I’m packing a small bag,” she chopped one foot by two in the air in front of her, “and so is Grandma. Will that be a problem?”

“No. In fact, we have room for more if you need to bring it. You should see what that aide is bringing!” He rolled his eyes and winked. They both laughed.

That night, Vivian dreamed about Zane’s azure eyes.

* * *

The next morning, Vivian and Grandma were standing in the central square of the compound in the pre-dawn twilight. Grandma pulled her sweater snug in the cool morning air of northern-Alabama winter. Vivian caught her profile and was startled anew at her hunched posture, fragile hands, thin hair (once black, now fully white), and the way the sweater hung deflated on her. There was no denying that the hardships since the Outbreak had taken their toll on Grandma Emma. For a moment, she wondered if the trip was a good idea, if it might be too hard on her. But then Emma Totter turned her brown eyes in Vivian’s direction, and the flash in them reminded Vivian that her fire, though banked, still burned bright.

“Let’s get this show on the road!” Grandma demanded impatiently.

“Soon, Grandma,” soothed Vivian. “Getting a group of sixteen people all going the same way at once is like herding cats.”

The sun had just cleared the horizon when they finally climbed into their vehicle and settled in. Cindy was at the wheel. Vivian had seen her about the compound but never knew her by name. Her hair poofed under a bandanna and her open smile contrasted with the taut, ready muscle of her brown arms. She wore a revolver as a sidearm and had her rifle slung over the back of her seat.

Zane leaned into the rear of the vehicle and handed Grandma and Vivian each a shotgun. Vivian took hers, checked the load, “Buckshot.” She set it diagonally across her lap pointed up and out; Grandma did the same. Zane nodded approval and moved on to arming and checking the rest of

the convoy. Jed settled in, riding shotgun with one shotgun, a full- auto rifle, and two semiautomatic pistols with extended magazines. The four cars all checked in on the radio.

Jed said, "Our average speed on these roads is about twenty-five miles an hour. Cullman's expecting us, and we'll radio them so they can let us through their gates. We stop overnight there."

"Cullman? That's where Grandma's from!" She smiled at the old woman, who nodded. Her hearing was excellent for a woman her age, and one who'd been exposed to more than a little gunfire, at that.

"Hmm. It's also the only enclave between here and Huntsville." The taciturn Jed spoke tersely into the radio, "Let's do it!" And the convoy rolled.

But first, the compound's crew went through the gate-opening protocol: two people on foot into no-mans-land, inner gates closed. Rattle gates, fire two shots, wait five minutes. One zombie came out of the woods and lurched towards them. Garcia stage 4, Vivian automatically assessed: hairless, monocular, integument and underlying fascia macerated, sex indeterminate, missing appendage (foot). The two crewmen waited patiently for it to lurch to the fence. A patrol stepped up and leveled his shotgun. The blast sprayed the creature's blackened tissue into the air, morbid confetti that rattled as it hit the ground. No other zombies showed, so they opened the inner gates, the convoy drove into the no-mans-land, forming up between the fences. They closed the inner gates and opened the outer ones.

"Only one deader. That's phenomenal!" crowed Zane over the radio. "A year ago there would have been at least eight or ten. *At least!*"

Cindy spared a moment from scanning their surroundings to glance back at Vivian. "That's down to you, Dr. Totter. You're gonna save the world!"

Vivian waved the praise away. "If it hadn't been me it would have

been someone else.”

“But it wasn’t someone else, was it?” said Cindy, “it was you! Eufala’s very own. And we get to drive you to Huntsville to get an award!”

Cindy had to concentrate on driving. Zane had said the roads were rough, but that was an understatement. The past three decades, anyone who’d ventured outside the fences for highway maintenance took his life in his hands. They’d done the bare minimum and sometimes not even that, so the roads had deteriorated— asphalt slowly crumbled, then gravel washed away. In some places the roads were no more than dirt tracks; in other places the dirt-track detours were more passable than the gullied roadbed. The summer was wet, so they had to watch for mire that could trap the trucks. Cindy eventually stopped apologizing to Grandma, enthroned on her feather pillows, for every bump.

Once the convoy reached the rise overlooking Cullman, they examined the survivor’s compound. It had once been a monastery of nuns, but the grounds were now surrounded by a buffer of concentric chain-link and concertina-wire fences, just like home. Inside the fence was a jumble of huts, motorhomes, tents, shanties and lean-tos, lining the barrier and extending all the way up to the monastery’s august rock cathedrals, halls, and dormitories.

The vaccine hadn’t yet begun to transform life in this community, and they had a precious crate of vials earmarked for Cullman. As they approached the settlement in the hollow, there was an especially bad stretch of road, where they were forced to slow to a crawl to avoid breaking an axle or ending up in a ditch. The cars slowly rocked and bumped their way along, Emma jostled and shaken, uncomplaining but plainly uncomfortable. The truck chassis clunked and the transmissions groaned. Predictably, zombies emerged from the underbrush, drawn by the noise. Thorny vines clawed shreds of skin from them as readily as clothing as they lumbered out, indifferent to the losses. Several blocked

the lead vehicle, and two clawed at Vivian's side window.

Vivian gazed at them dispassionately: one was freshly metamorphosed, she assessed, within the past 48-72 hours. Judging by skin tone and resiliency, Garcia 1. It slapped its palms to the window, showing intact distal extremities. It clawed ineffectually with fingernails that still bore traces of polish. It also had still relatively undamaged hair and clothing. In dim light, it could have passed for a human, a ponytailed blonde. The other was skeletal, its lips and eyelids desiccated and fallen away to reveal a staring rictus, its hair a patchy, matted broom. It swung its ropy, fractured arms like slings to strike the window. It was missing all but two fingers on one hand and missing the other hand from the forearm down. Garcia 3+/4-.

"Defensive action," hissed Zane over the radio.

"Copy that," Jed responded, unlocking his passenger door by hand, jumping out, and landing in a semi-squat, swinging his shotgun to bear. Cindy thumbed the door lock closed before Zane hit the ground. Jeff, Zane, and Dan (or was it Samuel?) were outside their vehicles. Tom and Tyler, in the unmolested back car, didn't even bother. Vivian and Emma clutched their shotguns, but the fighters outside seemed bored, all in a day's work, as they blew the infected away like kids plinking bottles in the woods.

The caravan rolled into Cullman right on schedule. Just like home: decayed zombie bones hung from the concertina wire and littered the ground outside. A few, freshly snagged, twitched or writhed on the razor-sharp spines.

As the convoy approached the gate, they stopped about 100 yards back and radioed their presence. Four security men once again jumped out, one from each vehicle, holding rifles this time. A squad of fighters from the enclave, toting shotguns, piled out of the inner gate, which closed behind them. The convoy's fighters dropped back, and the compound's guards fired a series of blasts in an overlapping fan pattern to both sides, well clear

of the convoy. These shots took out a few zombies at close range, but there was one, Garcia 1, a teenager with intact skin, cornrows, and barely soiled clothing, that caught only the edge of the spray of shot and kept coming towards the convoy; Zane took aim with his rifle and made an easy head shot.

The outer gates swung open and the convoy crept through, rifle shooters backing up at the rear, staying at ready until the outer gates closed. Only then did the inner gates swing open.

Vivian emerged from the vehicle, stretching and swinging her arms before turning to help Grandma out. As they straightened, an elderly nun in antiquated floor-length black habit and white wimple stepped up.

“Dr. Totter?” she said, “I’m Sister Elaine. Welcome back to Sacred Heart.” Her blue eyes peered out of furrowed cheeks at Vivian’s face, seeking recognition.

“Welcome *back*?” Asked Vivian.

Sister Elaine flinched as though someone had elbowed her. “Oh, of course you don’t remember! You were just a child! It was your mother...” Sister Elaine caught sight of something urgent she had to do in the next room and abruptly scurried through the door, calling behind her, “Sister Veronica will be with you in a moment.”

Sister Veronica, young and painfully effervescent, stepped up almost at once and introduced herself first to Grandma, then to Vivian. Grandma set out on her own before the introduction was finished, as if she already knew this Benedictine abbey.

Sister Veronica trotted to overtake her and steered Grandma and Vivian to their austere guest-of-honor quarters, a bedroom with two single beds with patchwork quilts, two wooden desks with wooden chairs, and a small chifferobe. “Please join us for dinner in the dining hall. Turn right here, up one floor, across the corridor, and downstairs past the library. The bell rings at 6 and dinner is at 6:15.” Vivian looked at her vintage self-

winding watch: 3:05. She spent the next half hour getting Grandma and herself settled in. Grandma wanted to nap, but Vivian felt hungry and restless, so she went out to explore the grounds. Maybe she'd run into Zane.

A roughly circular walk divided the refugee city and the monastery. A gazebo was centrally located among the ramshackle dwellings, low zigzag crowd-control fences leading up to it. A table and supplies suggested that it was used as a daily soup kitchen. The families she saw were diverse and mingled freely, but loose districts of blacks, Hispanics, and whites formed a crazy quilt of permanent encampments.

As she wandered around the big circle and passed a man with a white beard and mustache pushing a wheelbarrow of tree limbs and yard trash. He stopped, perhaps ten feet away, and said, "Carrie!" His tone and expression were broadly cheerful, as if addressing a pet or small child. Then he shook his head, muttering "No! Can't be. Are you Carrie's daughter?"

"Yes, that's me! Vivian."

Before she could step forward to shake hands, he shook his head and growled, "Should have slit her throat. Saved us all the trouble." Vivian faltered, speechless, bewildered. He shuffled his wheelbarrow past.

She had no luck bumping into Zane, so she made her way to the monastery dining hall per Sister Veronica's instructions. The plain room, large and low-ceilinged, held eight-foot communal tables and folding chairs. At the end of the room, she saw the bustle of people fixing to serve the evening meal via the kitchen pass-through. She helped Grandma into a chair and wandered over to offer help with dinner.

She waited at the counter, watching the women inside run mixers, ladle grits, scrape griddles, and lift huge steaming trays out of industrial-sized ovens. A sixtyish woman approached, rolling a cart of plates and cutlery. The woman startled.

"Oh! Oh, it's you. I mean, you look just like your mother. Oh, dear,

I... I'm so sorry." The woman blushed, then scurried away. *Hmm*. No one seemed to need help, so Vivian took her place across from Grandma.

Grandma looked at Vivian over her book. She peered closely at her face. Grandma sighed and set the book down. "What have they said to you?" she asked. So, there was something going on. Grandma would come clean. The old lady was forthright as a shovel to the back of the head and mean as a rattlesnake when she needed to be.

"*Said?* Nothing! But that's the third person who's mentioned my mother and then spooked and run away."

Grandma patted her own chin with a wilted hand. "I should have told you sooner. What do you remember about your mother?"

"Not much," Vivian answered slowly. "I know she died when I was almost four. I remember sitting on her lap, her rocking me. Holding me and rocking and humming." Vivian closed her eyes. She treasured that one memory of her mother, would reach for it when sleep eluded her, could hum the simple melody, one bar over and over, until her breath evened out and she drifted into an ocean of moonlight and soft currents of breeze. Just thinking of it now, the anxiety of this conversation seemed a little less urgent.

"Do you know how she died?"

"From what everyone said, I assumed a zombie got her. Young as she was, that's how most people go."

"That's right, child. That's right." Grandma hesitated. A long time. Her brown eyes seemed fixed on something far away. Vivian leaned forward, and that made up Grandma's mind to speak.

"Vivian, your mother was not right."

"What do you mean, 'not right?'" Asked Vivian.

"I mean, simple. What we used to call retarded. Later they called it mentally challenged. Developmentally disabled. Whatever you want to call it.

"I was only nineteen and in college when she was born. I had no idea I was pregnant, almost until the very end. I drank like a politician. I wore loose sweatpants and baggy shirts in dorm and showered when no one else was awake. When I went into labor, I told myself I'd eaten something spoiled.

"There was so much blood! I finally called 911—" Vivian tipped her head questioningly.

"That's the number we used to call when — oh, never mind! — I called for help. It took them four hours to find me on campus. By that time, your mother Carrie was in deep trouble."

"I see," said Vivian, and she did. She knew what anoxia from hemorrhage could do to an infant during delivery. Vivian didn't remember her mother ever walking with her, talking to her, and suddenly it all made sense. "My mother was brain damaged at delivery. But, how did she die then?"

"Just as you thought: A deader got her. She was 13. She was scheduled for a hisstersalpothingy..."

"Hysterosalpingectomy?" Suggested Vivian. "Exactly."

"You were going to *sterilize* her?"

"It was what was done. There were too many people, not like now, my dear. It was all perfectly legal. We had a court order and I'd signed off as her guardian. But then the zombies started coming and things got bad. I got us out of Birmingham and came here."

A few early arrivals had drifted into the dining hall. The bell rang: 6:00. The cutlery and dishes were set on the counter in the window and platters and trays of steaming food were set out, but Vivian's hunger had vanished. She spotted Zane sitting down at a table with the rest of the security crew, but that hunger seemed to have receded as well.

"So," she asked, "who was my dad?"

"We don't know for sure," said Grandma. "But we think it was a

boy who looked after her in the afternoons when I was at work. You look exactly like her — exactly. *Except* her hair was curly and yours is straight. Like his. He knew she was getting the operation. We think he took advantage.” Her wizened lips pressed themselves.

Vivian recoiled in disgust, then moments later was absolutely gobsmacked by the knowledge that, without that rape, she wouldn’t exist. She looked at Grandma, who was studying her from under hooded lids. Grandma knew what was going on in Vivian’s mind. At the very moment Vivian worked it out, Grandma continued.

“You were born here. You spent the first four years of your life here at Sacred Heart. Sister Elaine was your first babysitter. I had been an oblate here...”

“Oblate?”

“Kind of a try-out status to becoming a nun. It was years earlier. I decided it wasn’t for me and left for college instead. But the nuns treated me as one of their own all the same, when we came with the other the refugees. We lived here in the dormitory, you, me and Carrie, and about forty other women.

“The fences weren’t double back then. A big storm came, washed out a gully, and a zombie managed to squirm through the gully and right up to the chair where your mother was sitting in the sun. Before anyone knew it, it had taken a big bite out of her.”

Vivian closed her eyes, dazed, queasy.

“Emma!” Exclaimed Sister Elaine, coming up at that moment with her food tray and sitting next to Grandma. “Let’s catch up! But first let’s get you something to eat. You must try the cornbread. It’s Sister Gertrude’s specialty.”

She took Grandma’s arm and the two older women headed for the line at the window. Vivian’s appetite had sagged, but now it surged, a full-body hunger that had nothing to do with pleasure, and she followed,

served herself. She ate reflexively, hardly tasting, speaking in monosyllables. Grandma excused her to the others as fatigued, both from her journey and from working around-the-clock on the vaccine.

Vivian went to bed early, and dreamed of an infected subject squatting on the ground and giving birth to another infected subject who immediately squatted down and gave birth to another, ad infinitum.

* * *

She woke with her teeth fitted together like the jaws of a trap, her tongue imprinted on the insides of her molars and jammed against the roof of her mouth. She sat up into a headache at the base of her skull. The sun was up; she'd overslept. She grimly threw her kit together and met the crew downstairs, said little at breakfast, and wedged herself next to Grandma and her pile of pillows once again. Grandma seemed extra spunky, giving the bodyguards hell for rushing her, then giving them hell for the late start they were making.

The road through the hills from Cullman to Huntsville was so degraded that they crept along at a snail's pace. They got lost once, and had to back precariously down a switchback dirt road that had disappeared at the crest of a ridgeline. An infected subject crept after them on limb stumps, and each vehicle backed, crunching, over it. But otherwise, they made it all the way to Huntsville without incident.

They approached the gate late in the afternoon.

Vivian looked on in awe. This compound had the same double fences she was used to, but they stretched out of sight in both directions. The town itself was nothing but squat cement-block buildings surrounded by refugee camps, but the camps went on for miles, semi- cylindrical metal buildings that grandma called quonsets. Narrow roads defined the rows, corn and vegetable patches the columns.

Inside, Vivian supervised the hand-off of crates of precious vaccine to the town's chief doctor, Michael Franklin, who they called their "medical

officer.”

Afterwards, Vivian, Michael, and Grandma sat on wood folding chairs on the edge of the clinic’s loading dock with a panoramic view of the grounds. They sipped lemonade spiked with fruit wine as afternoon grayed to evening. The whole polity was regimented. A horn blew for mealtimes, bath time, and bedtime. People used the facilities in shifts, and everyone knew their time to eat and bathe in the communal dining and bath halls.

“It’s because it was a military base,” Grandma explained. Seeing her granddaughter’s quizzical expression, “The military was the way people massed together to kill people from other countries.”

“I know that. That’s something from before, that never made sense to me. Why did they want to kill other normal humans, when they all had plenty for everyone to live on?”

“Well, they didn’t want to, not really. But someone could always convince them that different people were trying to hurt them, take their land, or ruin their way of life, so they had to hurt the others first.”

“Sounds like mass insanity to me.”

A hint of a smile. “Maybe it was, Vivian. Maybe it was. Certainly, the folks who couldn’t drop their grudges, didn’t survive very long when the real trouble hit.”

Michael, a taciturn, angular man, had loosened up with the alcohol. He spoke up, “‘Plenty’ is a subjective term. It may seem to you that people before the Outbreak were rich beyond anyone’s wildest dreams, but humans tend to only see what others have that they don’t. Have you noticed the way the quonsets are divided up?”

“What do you mean?”

“This nearest one,” he nodded, “is all Spanish-speaking.”

“I noticed them talking as they walked by a little while ago.”

“And that one,” he lifted a finger, “is all male homosexuals.”

Vivian smiled. “I did think it was odd that they were all men, and

most of them so neatly groomed.”

“The one beyond is all Christian fundamentalists. Pentecostalists, mostly.”

“What’s a Pentecostalist?”

“It’s a religion that believes the Holy Spirit descends on the heads of true believers in tongues of fire. They shake and speak in tongues. Sometimes they fall down.” Grandma interrupted.

“We didn’t have any Pentecostalist churches around Eufala. There were some Holy Rollers at Cullman, you just didn’t see them. They keep to themselves. The women cover themselves, keep their eyes down, don’t cut their hair, don’t wear makeup.”

Michael snorted. “Religious fanatics. Anyway, the base commander found it simplest to put different groups in different housing assignments to cut down on conflict among them. But also, the people seem to prefer it because they can negotiate with the operations and logistics supervisors more easily for their group’s specific needs.”

The party was escorted to the main building and shown to spartan bedrooms. Vivian again shared a room with Grandma.

She was glad when they were finally alone, because it gave her a chance to fire off the questions only Grandma could answer: Could Carrie talk at all? (No). Did she know she’d given birth to Vivian? (She cared for her instinctively, like a cat with a kitten). What was she like? (She liked music, even sang a little. She had a beautiful laugh which would peal out, sometimes, for no reason. She slapped her forehead when excited, and Grandma mimicked her, slapping her forehead and trailing the palm of her hand down her face, over and over).

Vivian’s dream that night was one of those rare, powerfully numinous dreams. The dream started as she drifted off to sleep, secure in her tableau of memory of her mother’s gentle lullaby, and then segued backwards in time, in the crazy logic of dreams, into her mother’s escape,

Vivian now still inside her, a secret growing amidst the chaotic landscape of global catastrophe.

Dream time continued in reverse, and baby Vivian shrunk smaller and smaller until she vanished. Freed from embodiment, her perspective in the dream ascended to a historical sweep: The past glorious era of human ascendancy (which she might, no, which she would restore). Amongst that abundance, brutality: living, breathing humans taking each others' lives. And what's more, wrenching the gift of giving life from their own bodies and those of others.

She was breathless with the beauty of the technology and the burgeoning populace sparkling over the entire world, crowding out the plants and the beasts and the elegant, intricate, oblivious scheme of the ecology.

Abruptly, the dream time began to run forward again, but she remained in her god's-eye view: the darkness of the virus exploding across the panorama of humanity. Following behind its engulfing wave, the birds and fish and bugs and flowers and mosses and trees

crowding in, reclaiming their lost domains. It was almost like the world breathing, this explosion and contraction of human life, a garish glitter on the face of the world which would in time, with the vaccine, reassert itself as inevitably as a dropped glass will hit the floor.

* * *

Vivian woke with quiet joy, sunlight still faintly pink with dawn streaming in the window of her private room in the base's main building. Today was the award ceremony.

She bathed and dressed in her finest dress, white cotton with lacy hand embroidery. The dream's impression lingered, pervading her mood and awareness with brightness.

An adjutant brought her and Grandma Emma a tray of breakfast, but they both ate sparingly.

He then escorted them outside, where she met her crew from Eufala, all spiffed up just like she was. They all fell in behind her, standing straight and proud as they entered the huge central parade ground and approached the stage.

A crowd was already assembling, funneled into the square using barricades, and down one side a long line of people stretched. A few relaxed MPs policed the line, keeping it moving smoothly. At the front were three tables. Each held a stack of vaccine ampules, a nurse at each one, administering shot after shot. Vivian beamed.

Just as the group reached the steps at the foot of the dais, a disturbance broke out at one of the tables. A woman with the long hair and skirts of a Pentecostalist, with eight children whizzing like electrons, she their nucleus, was raising a fuss.

“My brother and sister both died after having vaccines! They turned blue and foamed at the mouth and couldn’t breathe. My mom said it was horrible the way they died! Horrible! I’m not vaccinated and none of my kids will be vaccinated either!” The children now clustered together, stairsteps, each a year or two apart in age from the next eldest.

The nurse tried to calm the distraught woman. “Maybe they had some other disease? A lot of the time completely different illnesses happen at the same time by coincidence and they get blamed on the vaccine.”

“I’m not taking that chance! These kids are my life!”

Another mom nearby spoke up, “Everyone has to be vaccinated to produce herd immunity. I don’t want your kids spreading disease to mine!”

The woman waxed aggressive and irrational. As she got louder and louder, the police who were maintaining order all migrated to the head of the line and to her table. She whipped her head around, frantic, when they surrounded her and separated her from the kids. Vivian could see their aggression was misplaced—someone had to defuse the situation

“Stay here, Gramma,” she told Emma. She slipped out of her

protective formation (to her escorts' dismay) and wedged herself into the fracas.

As Vivian moved in, she assessed the family. She noted that the woman's oldest child was girl, a teenager. She moved a certain way so her belly strained against the long, loose dress she wore, and Vivian saw the girl was pregnant: perhaps six or seven months along. There were no men with the family group, and the youngest sibling was about four. The screaming woman was a widow, perhaps, or a single mother. And about to be a grandmother at about forty, not much older than Vivian herself.

Vivian slid past the last MP, putting a gentle hand on the woman's arm. The mother rounded on her, face crazed, aware of nothing, an animal defending her family. Vivian felt a jolt of raw panic at her snarl, and the nails that rose towards her face like daggers.

Before she could react, a pair of tanned, tattooed hands seized the mother's wrists. Following the hands to wrists, arms, shoulders, and a bearded face, familiar and protective, Viv recognized Zane, and her heart pounded its gratitude. His steady grip was strong enough to immobilize the attacking hands without hurting the mother.

Thus restrained, the mother paused, her chest still heaving with the residue of rage, long enough to take in Vivian's face and garb. She eased her struggling. The rest of Vivian's honor guard came bulling through the crowd, trailing the surprisingly agile Zane. They stopped short when they saw the situation under control. The mother fell silent, star-struck, her habitual meekness re-asserting itself. She twisted to look submissively at Zane, and he cautiously released her wrists, eyes locked with hers, ready to grab her again if necessary.

"What's your name?" asked Vivian softly. She turned from Zane to Vivian, the soul of gentleness now.

"Martha."

"Martha, do you know who I am?"

“Yes. You’re the lady doctor who made the vaccine to stop the zombie sickness.” “That’s right. I made it so that you, your children, and your grandchildren-to-be,” she cut her eyes towards the pregnant teen, “will be safe from the disease which has been killing us all for the last thirty-three years. I’ve taken it, my grandmother’s taken it, and all the people near my home have taken it. Eufala now has half the—” *use relatable vocabulary*, “deaders we had a few months ago, and the few that’re left are falling apart on their feet. People get bitten and don’t convert.

“Martha, I can’t tell you how important it is that this vaccine *works*! But: it can only work if everyone takes it. Listen: now isn’t the time to be timid, Martha.” Trying to build rapport with her patient, she let her voice echo the rhythmic cadence of a charismatic preacher. “*Now* is not the time to listen to some *scary* story your parents *told* you to frighten you when as a *child*. You *need* to do what’s right as a *mother*, and give yourself and your family the *best* chance to survive and be *safe*, and keep everyone else *safe*, too.” She swept her hand in a stately gesture at the circle of spectators, including the cops (who’d stepped back a crucial half-pace, Vivian was grateful to see).

Vivian placed her hand on her own heart, dropped her voice to almost a whisper. “I swear to you, this vaccine is perfectly safe.”

Martha searched Vivian’s eyes. Vivian saw hope in Martha’s. After a few timeless moments, Martha turned to the nurse. She gave one short nod. “Okay,” she said. “Okay, we’ll do it.”

The nurse didn’t have to be told twice. Before the words were out of Martha’s mouth, a syringe full of clear liquid jabbed her arm. The other two nurses stepped up to help, and all eight of the children got their shots as well, followed by a cheerful, tiny bandage. Martha smiled and picked up the youngest, a towheaded girl, still bawling from the needle stick. She stroked her blond curls. “That wasn’t so bad now, was it?” The girl quieted to an intermittent, tragic snuffle, inspecting her bandage.

Martha grinned shyly at Vivian. “That truly wasn’t so bad! I don’t know what I was so worried about!”

Vivian nodded warmly, patted Martha’s (unbruised, *Zane was so gentle*) forearm, and made her way back to the stage. She found her seat behind the podium.

She scanned the crowd and found Martha and her brood, who had filed in to fill the fourth row. Knowing those sweet children would never be infected, never turn into zombies, gave her a warm glow inside. *This is what makes being a doctor so rewarding. The one-on-one with patients, a firm hand and reassurance, when superstition and misinformation has made them afraid.*

She tried to catch Martha’s eye, but Martha was wiping the baby’s nose. No, the baby was falling asleep and she was trying to wake her up.

No, the baby was unconscious! The pregnant teenager was at the other end of the row, and she leaned precariously forward trying to see what was wrong. Then she tipped forward off her chair onto her knees, grabbing the back of the folding chair in front of her. The person in that chair turned in annoyance, and for a flashing moment, Vivian saw the pregnant teenager’s face, turning a mottled purple. The other children went down like a row of dominos. The dark-haired boy, nine or ten, was having a classic gran mal seizure, flailing arms and legs, kicking and writhing as those around him tried to hold him still or tried to get away, everyone entangled with the folding chairs.

Vivian stood up, intending to descend the steps and administer first aid to the family, but her guardians blocked her. “Too dangerous,” Zane said. She abided, impotent, confused, torn. The ethereal sensation of the dream had turned grim, and Vivian felt frustrated in her physician’s need: to act, in order to push away the horror of the moment.

A vehicle with a red cross pulled up and four strong medics forced their way through the crowd to carry the family off.

Vivian found her voice. She insisted Zane escort her to the infirmary, ignoring the disruption of the planned ceremony. She found herself clinging to his arm all the way there, desperate as a drowning woman clinging to a life ring.

Every physician makes mistakes, and sometimes things go wrong with patients for no reason at all. Ralph had taught her that and she'd learned to accept it years ago, learned to release guilt and what-ifs and remain dispassionate, move ahead.

Once they reached the clinic building, Zane hesitated. Vivian dropped his arm and walked alone through the ambulance-bay doors. The scene was bedlam. Every medical person on the base must have been at the parade grounds and instantly mobilized for this emergency. This tiny ER was used to treating zombie bites (amputation, or quarantine until euthanasia), but was taxed by dealing with seven children, of different ages, all at once. The medical team, stressed, were used to working together and it didn't even register with them that Vivian was a doctor.

The curly-headed toddler was sitting on mom's lap, an oxygen mask on her face, but awake, thank heaven! The boy with the seizure groaned, lolling on his side by a streak of his own vomit, batting away someone trying to shine a light in his eyes.

Vivian spotted the pregnant teenager on a gurney, half-in and half-out of a curtained bay, surrounded by scrub-clothed personnel, all scrambling to revive her.

"Blood pressure, 45/15."

"Pulse, flat."

"Anaphylaxis."

Someone tried futilely to start an IV in collapsed blood vessels. Someone was injecting epinephrine. More epinephrine. More! Vivian had come to help, but there was nothing for her to do without stepping on someone's toes or getting in the way of the team trying to

resuscitate the girl.

Light took on a brilliant clarity and every object was outlined vividly. She saw tiny details of every needle, wire, and connector. She saw the patient as the center of a sunburst of arms reaching towards her. She knew how the drama would end: life had left the girl for good.

Unaccustomed to standing still in a medical emergency, still processing the trauma of learning about her mother, she dissociated: she saw the whole scene as though from a birds- eye view. She was aware of the neat, precise lanes around it and the central square, where some still waited for the event, while others were leaving. She envisioned the entire compound, safe inside its protective fence. Outside, she saw the monsters, human bodies denied a clean death, changed into unwitting servants of the virus that had come so close to annihilating humanity.

Her vision telescoped back inwards: compound, hospital, room, girl. She knew what was going on inside the girl. Her doctor's mind envisioned the histamines flooding the patient's system, saw them trigger the cells of her throat to close, the muscles of her bronchioles to constrict, her blood vessels flaccidly lose their tone. She thought also of the tiny homunculus in her womb, thrashing quickly at first, and then more and more slowly, plummeting into dreamless sleep forever without ever being wholly awake.

Her perspective snapped back and forth, smaller and greater, faster and faster, until it became a vibration. The dead girl before her, her mother, her unborn child, strobed back and forth with the darkness of the virus battling the frenzied light of humanity across the face of the land, until the two images fused with her dream, and she saw it all.

Did Martha really choose? Did Carrie? Did anyone choose between humanity and nature?

* * *

The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough

to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. Three generations of imbeciles are enough.

—Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes II, *Buck v. Bell*,
1927

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think should happen with the new vaccine after the death of the family? What research, if any, should happen before the vaccine is used? What information would you want to know before releasing it?
2. Given that becoming a zombie is a pretty big deal, is there a % of acceptable vaccine deaths that would allow the vaccine to be released? 1% die? 5% die? 20% die? Does the severity of the sickness effect the acceptable death rate of the vaccine?
3. The story seems to argue against mandating vaccines as well as mandating sterilization. Is there a difference, if so, what is it? Would you be okay with mandatory sterilization for those who carry a gene that made getting the zombie virus more likely? Is there any acceptable scenario for mandatory vaccination or mandatory sterilization?
4. Is the ability to regulate what medicine you take (or if you have children) a “natural right?”
5. Is there an argument to be made that zombies are simply a new form of life, and (like a lion) have a right to feed and exist just like any other species?

* * *