

A-VOID

BABAK GOVAN

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It is comforting to know that there will be another sunset,
slow and lingering, with or without me to watch it.

—*The Plainness of My Fall*, Janice MacDonald

In 1606, English explorers set sail for the New World.
On May 14, 1607, they founded Jamestown.

CHAPTER 1:
VOID

I wish the sirens outside, signaling another mass death, to be the yelps of faraway seagulls. The concrete gates lock and quarantine the hospital, and although imprisoned for the fourth consecutive night, my schedule is the same as before the contamination tragedy.

It does not matter anymore. With the vaccine vials in my pocket now, we will soon escape.

Charts vine upwards along the walls and hallways, lurching onto the gutted chairs and powdery floor corners. The respirator is becoming unbearable and I wonder if it really works. But, we are parasites of hope. In my aching chair, I sit up among the charts to inspect Patient 34-665-78's results.

My breath's heat boomerangs back at me. Better than the odor of mildewed towels hovering over the laundry bin.

I think back to Friday morning, The Director facing away from me in his chair. "We just revised the *Policies & Procedures* last week and there's already a new one?" I said, picking up the manual. "This one's over seven hundred pages. How do they expect me to be a 'subject expert'?"

He leaned back and I could see his hairline. "What can I help you with?"

"Robert, I came to see you because I still don't think it's a good idea to close the other pathology labs. They might be our only chance. Other species are surviving."

He spun in his chair, stopped by his gold ring skidding along the glass overlay of his desk, carved certainly in a very old factory. "What do you know about *that*, Dr. Carrington? Do you also have opinions to share about our sexual-trimorphism research program?" He motioned with his fingers. "Provide your insights on the third sex." He opened up the Time Calculator on his Organelle and then reached into a drawer to pull out a sealed syringe.

"You *really* don't take me seriously?" I asked.

"That's not the only reason. We have to raise our reviews."

"We had five-star reviews last year. That's *exceptional* care."

"Not good enough anymore, just not good enough. People want eight-star reviews now. We can't settle for five."

“It’s bad enough that you’ve reduced my job from psychologist to untrained lab tech. At least consider that closing the labs is a terrible idea. Can’t you see what’s happening out there?”

“B, I had no one else to do the job.” He injected Botox from the syringe in between his brows.

“It’s Billy, not B.”

“There’s no time for *that*. I already said Dr. Carrington once. South Valley Hospital is a satellite, not a major research center. Your own lab is already a low priority. Plus, I’ve already secured transplants for my own family should they ever need them—and you should too.” He stopped injecting for a moment. “Heck, I know a few people who have done well enough without transplants.”

“You’re biased toward the exception. Millions are dying. We need all the grafts we can get right now. Robert, can you look at me?”

He moved to his seat’s edge and, like an orangutan, placed his knuckles on his knees to sit up. “They don’t pay me to *think*. They pay me to act.” His stare reminded me that we had been through this many times before.

I turned for the door.

“Hey.”

I turned halfway around, he shrugged his shoulders, and I realized that at least he was uncertain about letting the idea go.

Securing the slide on a new stage, I place my eyes on the ocular, power up, swivel the adjustment knobs, and there they are:

Babak Govan

Pseudomonas aeruginosa, rod-shaped bacteria in crystal violet, cultured from Patient 34-665-78's lungs. I'm still getting used to saying *Pseudomonas*.

I watch the bacteria swarm and recoil like anemones in open air. The cells crouch in corners, forcing the unlucky to the perimeter. I wonder if something is watching us too.

After a few seconds, the clumps loosen and the cells swim freely again. For Patient 34-665-78, the antibiotic does not work. I mark the blood agar plate "resistant," stack it in the Notify the Family bin, and shut down the microscope.

It's 2:42 AM. I attempt a deep breath. In nine hours and eighteen minutes, I will reunite with Jasmine and Isabella in the foothills. Trusting it was effective, I injected my own vaccine as soon as I received it from The Director. Soon they will have theirs.

The television, sound off, flickers from the corner. I watch a commercial of a truck steering accidentally over an embankment. The caption "Dramatization: do not attempt this at home" bewilders me. The usual programming of bodies splattered across the world returns. I command my Organelle v463.2 to turn off the TV and, through the window, I see Chang leave his lab and walk exhaustedly down the hallway.

Before exiting the Clean Room to eat my sandwich, I store the Bunsen burner and inoculating loops in the cabinet below the centrifuge stand, then align the methylene-blue and crystal-violet stains beside bottles of ethanol and acetone. I enter the Strip-down Room to strip off my latex gloves, gas mask, mobcap, and coverall suit and stuff them into the Decon basket.

My toes curl against the icicle tiles of the Washroom. I wipe away the condensation on my face. I have become an expert at dialing the loose shower knob to steal the little heat left. It gives me a sense of life again.

I dress rapidly in fresh scrubs and pull a bottle of beer from the compact refrigerator, directing its cap at the overflowing wastebasket. I wash down my sleeping pills and plop in the chair, leaning to review the *Hospital Daily*.

TODAY'S LANGUAGE POLICY ADDITIONS

Whenever communicating, use this non-offensive language:

1. Replace "Asian" with "An individual with ancestral connections to individuals from the southeastern region of Asia."
2. Replace "pregnant" with "An individual who is host to an unborn human."
3. Replace "child" with "progeny" ("child" may involve age bias). Never use "son" and "daughter."
4. When describing someone, terminate use of adjectives before nouns (e.g., say "an individual who is tall" versus "a tall individual").

REMINDERS FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

1. Remember to arrive to work at least fifteen minutes early every day. Leave fifteen minutes after your shift to ensure all work is complete. This time is not compensated.
2. Employee voicemail greetings must include the phrase "I will return your call within thirty minutes."

3. When leaving phone messages for patients, employees cannot state the name of the hospital, their own name, their title, our phone number, or the reason for the call. This secures patient privacy.
4. For improved patient privacy, we are removing all windows from the building.
5. To limit legal risks, we do not permit employees to receive thank you cards or gifts from patients. Please reject all gifts and cards and reference this policy.
6. To ensure a respectful environment, you may not decorate your office with personal items such as family photos.
7. We respect personal space. No one is allowed to touch a patient unless necessary for a medical procedure. Please refer to Human Resources for instructions on how many inches of distance to keep in different situations.
8. Ensure that you take a ten-minute rest break every four hours but remember not to take breaks between 8 AM and 10 PM.
9. For vacations, remember that you cannot take off two consecutive weeks. Requests must be made one year in advance and you must ensure coverage before taking any vacation. All overdue work must be complete within two days after your return. No vacation time is available in November, December, May, July, or August.
10. Family leave, including for funerals, is for first-degree relatives. You must provide a DNA sample to HR and receive laboratory confirmation before taking such leave.
11. You must use accrued paid time off (PTO) for nationally observed holidays, sick time (including doctor's visits), family leave, vacations, rest breaks, bathroom breaks, and lunchtime. Ninety days' advance notice to HR is

required for each incident. Once approved, complete Forms 42-A and 7-B35 for each incident and have them signed by your supervisor.

12. If an unexpected personal or family matter arises, please remember that you must request time off with at least two weeks' notice.
13. When renewing your license, remember to update Forms 855R and 5649, the Employee Portal, the Employee Dashboard, the HR Compliance Database, and Payroll Sourcing. Provide copies to HR and your supervisor within three days. You must document all continuing education credits.
14. Please remember to take your annual exams for Sexual Harassment, Best Practices, Ethics & Law, Workplace Safety, and Customer Satisfaction.
15. Remember to make use of our Employee Fitness Program!
16. Ask yourself, "How many benchmarks did I hit today?" Next, ask yourself, "Should I develop a new Development Plan?"

We are a family-first and mental-health-friendly workplace!

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Add an Hour to the Clock is a federal research program to add an hour to every day. To participate, please contact HR.

HUMAN MEAT DONATIONS REMINDER

Please encourage family members to donate the remains of their deceased for meat production.

Babak Govan

On the same bulletin board is the old *ASM News* article, posted by Dudley.

“They’ve let me go, Billy,” he told me the day he was fired.

“What?”

“Today, I told Elizabeth, the nurse’s aide, that her new hairstyle was nice. She claimed it was harassment.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Did you cut your hair? It looks good. Thanks for bringing down the charts.’ That’s it. I barely even looked at her.”

“Really?”

“Do you know what the worst part is?” he said, his lips quivering. “What am I going to do with my time? I don’t know what else to do.”

The virus killed him three weeks later.

A large gulp hurts my throat. Like him, I warned people with Armand Vander’s *Zeitgeist* manifesto. They belly-laughed first and then snarled.

I rest my head between my arms on the tabletop. With a deep breath, I remember briefly what life used to be like. I close my eyes and hope I’ll dream of yesterday again.

Psychologists say we avoid the things we fear. Some say the thing we fear the most is the unknown, but the thing we really fear is the monster that resides within the unknown, and that monster is truth.