

Waking Up

by

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She was hungry.

Prolonged hunger brought the pain—an intense pain throughout her body that could only be satisfied by feeding on something alive. She sniffed the air as she staggered down the empty street. Something alive was on the move.

She quickened her pace down an alley to where it met a main road. The heat beat down on her as some voice in the back of her mind told her it was the hot season. In the distance, several others with the *hunger* ran after a screaming woman who was trying to outrun the carnivorous mob. She ambled as fast as she could after the crowd as the insatiable hunger continued driving her.

The woman ran into a parking lot surrounded by chain-link fencing with no exit. When she caught up to the mob, it had cornered the woman. And more than forty heads bowed competing for a taste of the warm flesh. She dived into the dog-pile slinging two or three others out of her way.

Spotting a bare leg, she opened her jaws and tore a chunk of meat from the calf. The prey lay dead, or dying, but all she cared about was feeding again. The pain had subsided, for the moment.

Two Weeks Later

She walked down the road and noticed the pavement burning her bare feet. Her mind and body were changing faster than she could comprehend. There seemed to be more beings like her shuffling up and down this street than there had been a short time ago. The *hunger* took control of her again as a tasty looking dog crossed her path. She lunged toward it making the scared animal dart across a vacant lot into a residential neighborhood.

She followed the dog's pheromone trail. The vacant houses seemed familiar, but she didn't know or care why. The scariest change was the visions that randomly flooded her mind, transporting her somewhere else. The small voice deep in her brain called these visions *memories*.

Sniffing the wind, the dog's scent smelled stronger to the right, making her hurry into a backyard through an open gate and out another into a wooded area. Flies and gnats nested on her face, but she ignored them as she splashed through a shallow stream at the bottom of a steep ravine.

The sudden cold wetness enveloping her feet shocked her into immobility.

She peered into the water running over her ankles staring at a distorted reflection. Her hair was dry, brittle, and tattered in all directions. She didn't recognize the face staring back at her, but she touched the sores on her forehead, cheeks, and arms that oozed a black fluid. She stumbled backward and fell into the water as an image of a young boy and girl splashing in a big blue swimming pool filled her mind like a flash flood.

Another memory.

She clutched her head in her hands as she stared at the steep hillside, the dog all but forgotten. Who were these children invading her mind? Their images ignited her hunger, but the small voice chided her for thinking of them as food. The vision changed, and she saw herself being carried by a handsome man toward the pool where the children splashed and cheered.

A rustling in the bushes pulled her attention from the water. Maybe the dog was back or some other creature which could serve as a meal.

A man wearing all black with weird contraptions covering his body stepped from the bushes aiming a small metal box at her. A second later it fired two metal prongs which hit her in the chest causing intense heat all over her body. She dropped to the ground, unable to understand why her muscles remained unresponsive.

Another man approached from behind and shot her with another metal box. They bound her arms and legs behind her as a muzzle like a baseball catcher's mask was placed over her face. Her mind identified the heat as electricity which intensified again before everything faded to black.

* * *

"Vanessa? Vanessa, can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes a quarter of an inch. The room's bright, painful light made her close them again. The man's voice calling her Vanessa sounded familiar, but she couldn't think of his name.

Vanessa. Was that her name?

"Dim the lights. I think she's awake and finally lucid," the man's voice said. "Take your time, Vanessa. Try and clear your head and tell me my name."

"What am I—"

Her throat was dry and felt as if it were full of jagged rocks. She cleared it and tried to speak again.

"What am I doing here? Who are you people?" She shook her head from side to side. "What's happening to me?"

She tried to adjust her body's position in the hospital bed and then realized her arms were restrained. "Why can't I move?"

"We'll remove your restraints soon. Once we're sure the virus has left you completely," the man said. "Now, can you look at my face and tell me my name?"

She squinted at his face. A pair of round rimmed glasses rested low on the bridge of his nose making his dark brown eyes look larger than they were. His head was bald on top with dark hair on the sides. He had a pudgy face which made her think the rest of his body was probably robust, bordering on obese. A thought of him as a large chunk of meat splintered through her mind like cascading lightning.

Why did she want to eat him? The thought repulsed her only seconds after making her salivate.

"How can I know who you are when I don't know who I am?" She dropped her head back to the pillow and closed her eyes.

"I'm doctor Ron Hargraves and you're Doctor Vanessa O'Hagan. We were the lead researchers on the Apollos Project."

She opened her eyes. "The what?"

"The Apollos Project. We were close, very close, to curing any and all strains of the COVID-19 virus by introducing a retrovirus genetically enhanced with recombinant DNA from the COVID virus itself, and then combined with irradiated cells of

the new retrovirus Curen. The first few days after introduction we thought we had it beaten."

"What happened?" Her croaking, raspy voice made her sound like a frog after smoking three packs a day for twenty years.

"The COVID-19 virus started dying. For four days it stopped mutating and every time we applied the new generation of Curen to it, it died. The primate test subjects were as unaffected by it as they were COVID, and then. . ." The doctor sighed, dropping his gaze to his hands.

"It all went wrong after we tested it on the first human subjects. Something happened once the cure was injected into the human body. In a testing environment, it killed COVID every time, but once inside a human it somehow changed. Not the virus itself, it's textbook knowledge that a virus mutates, and all known medicines are useless against it. For some reason it began abandoning its attack on the human immune system and attacked brain functions."

"I know you're telling me all of this like I'm supposed to understand it, but could you please tell me why in the hell this miracle drug was introduced to humans after barely a week of positive test results?"

She had an irresistible urge to wipe her fingers across her forehead but didn't know why and being restrained only fueled her rising temper.

Hargraves held his hands up in front of him as if she was pointing a gun at him.

"Look, I admit we got overexcited, we acted too soon and didn't follow protocol by considering the possible long-term effects. But that's just it, all the effects were good, and none were detrimental. Possible bad repercussions were just that, possible. We didn't know—"

"Harvey," Vanessa interrupted. "Or whatever your name is, this sounds like it's supposed to be familiar to me and I'm trying to care, but right now I can't remember what a retrovirus is. I'm guessing I'm one of the ones that helped you do this and from what you're saying we messed up huge. If that's the case, unstrap me and tell me when the authorities will be here to arrest us. I'm starving. At least in prison they feed you three times a day. Don't you all have any food? I need meat, dammit!"

Hargraves whistled as he wheeled his stool several feet away from Vanessa's bed.

"The hunger's taking hold again. Sedate her. Maybe her body will have completely eradicated the virus in a few more days," Hargraves said to two tall men in white lab coats.

"Sedate me? Bullshit, I'm hungry. Feed me," she screamed as one of the men took a syringe and injected something into her IV. "I want—"

Vanessa's eyes became heavy as her ranting trailed off to a light snore, allowing the hunger to be forgotten.

* * *

Another two weeks passed. Vanessa O'Hagan sat, unrestrained, in a chair next to the window in her room. She became more lucid as the days led into weeks, and her biggest challenge was trying to determine what from her nightmares was real. She accepted the memories of her family as real. The images she'd had weeks earlier of two children splashing in a pool while a man carried her to the water was of her husband getting ready to throw her in their pool to play with their kids.

Realizing she had a family before she became sick made her long for them, but there were other visions she hoped were nightmares where she was in a dark house and her children were screaming in terror as they ran from her.

She remembered several facts. She was a virologist researcher working at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia. Her friend and co-worker Doctor Lisa Gentry had visited her several times during her early recovery period and helped her remember the name of her husband, Kyle, and her children, Jimmy and Sara. Once she remembered their names, their faces and personalities came rushing back, making her want nothing more than to hold and kiss them.

A knock at the door roused her from her chair. She opened it and let Doctor Hargraves in.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Better. I know I was very ill, and it would make perfect sense for me to be quarantined from my family, but do they come and visit on a regular basis? When can I see them?"

Hargraves kept a poker face as he gestured toward a chair with his hand and asked her to sit down.

"What aren't you telling me?" Vanessa sat reluctantly.

"Listen, first, the good news: your blood work came back clean. There are absolutely no traces of the virus left in your body. We took a sample of your blood and injected it with the virus, and your blood killed it! I dare say that, like the rest of us, you are now completely immune."

"The rest of you? Everyone here is immune from the disease?"

Hargraves smiled and nodded.

"Then why are we shut up in here? Let's isolate the compounds in our blood that cures the disease and go out and cure everyone else."

"That's not a good idea. We are immune. It doesn't mean we no longer look delicious to those infected."

"Delicious? Ron, what are you talking about?"

Hargraves' face reddened and he seemed unable to meet her eyes.

"That part of your memory hasn't come back yet?" Vanessa shook her head. "Your mind is probably repressing it. I don't know how to tell you this, it was difficult for all of us to accept when we were going through Reversion. The virus changed us in ways, horrible ways, that we're still trying to get a

handle on. I-we, uh," he stumbled over his words like a teenager trying to give a book report on a novel he hadn't read.

Vanessa's Irish genes took over as she said: "Spit it out. Come on, I want to see my family."

"It turned us into cannibals. In a manner of speaking," Hargraves sighed.

"Cannibals?"

"Yes. But eating human flesh wasn't enough, or we just would have stuck to eating dead people. The virus modified our brains, autonomic functions, hell even our impulses! In a nutshell, the only sustenance our bodies would accept was the warm meat from living flesh. It probably has something to do with the hormones a body releases under extreme stress. We're still trying to isolate that, too."

Vanessa put her hand over her mouth and collapsed back into her chair, her family temporarily forgotten.

"What are you saying? Are you saying that I have killed and eaten people?"

"Yes," Hargraves said in red-faced shame. "We all have. There are close to two hundred people in this building, which

we're about to outgrow, but every single one of them has been where you are now.

"You have to understand we feared the worst. Either someone had killed you in self-defense or that you wondered off destined to remain infected. You see, in our sickened state, we were much harder to kill, and it gave us several advantages." Hargraves emphasized the last word like it was supposed to mean something to her.

Vanessa was appalled. "Advantages? Are you serious? How the hell can you say there are advantages to eating people? Have you lost your mind? Get Gentry and Soren in here. You're the one that needs to be strapped to a bed."

"I understand how you feel, but the harsh reality is that it happened and now we have to deal with it."

"Where's my fam-"

"Dead. They're dead. Most of the old society that you knew is gone, and all due to the cure we were so intent on finding." He shrugged and leaned forward putting his elbows on his knees.

"Oh, dear God in heaven! You mean outside this building it's like an apocalypse movie? *I Am Legend* and *The Book of Eli* and all that bullshit?"

"Not that bad. We have power from generators and what is now an endless supply of gasoline, canned food, and just about anything else you can imagine since the few of us left are the only ones using the resources. Doctor Costner, if you'll remember, was a big hunter before all of this went down. As far as meat goes, he's been getting us deer, duck, and an occasional bear. You ever eaten bear? It's not that bad."

"Cut to the chase and tell me why there are only two hundred of us here. There were seven-billion people on the planet, why haven't we hit the streets with Curen and brought our numbers up into the thousands?"

"Well, let's see. Over half of that seven-billion became flesh-eaters, and most of the ones that didn't fell victim to said flesh-eaters. There aren't too many people left out there to save."

He had turned into a smartass, and it was pissing her off.

"And not everyone reverts," Hargraves continued. "We lost two people a week ago to a mob. We were trying to rescue two more to see if they were in reversion, and our people got ambushed by the infected."

"Some people have heart attacks, their lungs explode, have brain embolisms—we've seen all kinds of things happen to people when *forced reversion* was attempted on them. Some people's bodies, like yours and mine, start reversion on their own, and then others we injected with the new compounds found in our blood. Reversion is like an addiction only ten times worse. You don't get to choose to become one of the cannibals but getting back to normal is a Hell that few survive." He shrugged. "Maybe that's what rehab is like for hardcore meth or heroin users."

"You mentioned abilities." Vanessa squinted when she said it. She stood and began pacing the room.

Hargraves gestured toward her drawings on the walls and one watercolor painting she'd done of the vase sitting next to her windowsill. "Have you always been an artist?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't remember ever being able to draw a straight line. Now I feel like I can draw anything if I look at it long enough. It's weird."

"Have you noticed anything else you've been doing that you don't remember being able to do before?"

She leaned against the windowsill.

"I haven't tried anything else. I've been kooked up in this damn room undergoing test after test, and the virus may be gone but cabin fever is setting in."

"Sure. I understand. Come on, let's take a walk. Maybe it will help bring some more of your memory back."

Hargraves took her on an *unrestrained* tour of the facility. He showed her the food court, the gym, his office, her office, and the labs they shared.

Some of it, Vanessa remembered, and other parts of the building seemed like she was seeing them for the first time. The tour took two hours and at the end of it she felt worn out from fatigue. Hargraves told her that her condition was understandable since her physical activity had been limited over the past month. He took her back to her room, so she could rest for the night.

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Vanessa went to the cafeteria for breakfast with her friend, Lisa Gentry, the following morning. She hesitated at the entrance when she saw over fifty people chatting and eating at

various tables as if it were just another workday and the end of life as they all knew it hadn't happened. Hargraves had told her how many people lived in the building, but the reality of it hadn't hit until she saw so many of them in one room.

They filed through the line and Vanessa decided to eat a banana and a bowl of instant strawberries and cream oatmeal to help her body acclimate to other foods besides meat. She noticed Lisa chose a bowl of dry Frosted Flakes, an apple, and a large cup of black coffee.

The room was about half the size of a high school gymnasium with one wall constructed of glass from floor to ceiling. They chose a table next to the giant window overlooking a large grassy knoll that stretched about a hundred yards ending abruptly at a chain-link fence separating the property from the interstate.

Lisa said, "Are you getting back into the groove with your other co-workers?"

"Not yet," Vanessa said through a mouthful of oatmeal. The stuff never tasted so good, and she considered going back for seconds. "What's on your mind? You're acting weird. At least from what I can remember of how you acted before, this is weird."

"What are your post-flesh-eating impressions of Hargraves?"

"I don't know. At first, I was grateful he found me and brought me back here to make sure my body continued its reversion, but now I feel like I remember him as a snake in the grass, like I didn't trust him before the *infection*."

Lisa took a sip of coffee and said, "Memory or no memory, those are good instincts."

"Why?"

"What did he tell you about your family?"

"Just that they're dead. Why? Does he know more?"

"As far as the rest of us know, Ron Hargraves was the last to become infected and die and one of the first, if not *the* first to revert back to life. Of the twenty researchers with PhD's working on the mutated cure, only seven of us are here and alive now." Lisa leaned forward with her elbows on the table and stared into Vanessa's face.

"What do you mean, die, and what does that have to do with my family?"

Lisa sighed. "Listen girl, everyone who's been infected died, or parts of them did. Reversion caused our bodies to do

. . . something, and then we came back. I love you and I want to tell you so many things, but we have sort of an unspoken pact here to let everyone's memories come back on their own. That includes the deaths of their loved ones. The truth will surface when your mind believes it's no longer necessary to repress what happened. In Layman's terms, you'll remember when your subconscious believes your conscious mind can handle it."

Vanessa finished eating and rubbed her fingers across her forehead whether locks of her dark auburn hair were there or not. She remembered it was a habit she'd had since she was a little girl.

"Okay. What did Hargraves mean about us Reverts having *new abilities*? It's true that I've never been able to draw before but now drawing and painting come so naturally that I don't know what to think of it."

"That bastard," Lisa muttered, gritting her teeth. "That's where the house is divided. There's a group of us that believe our new abilities are a social taboo and reprehensible considering how we got them, and then there is the other group, Hargraves' group, that believes the abilities make them god-like and they've been talking about finding a way to acquire more of

them. He's been schmoozing you ever since they found you. He was ecstatic when he discovered you were reverting."

Vanessa's temper was starting to get the better of her again, and she leaned forward and said: "Just tell me what the hell is going on. How are these mysterious new abilities acquired?"

"The abilities come from the brains of people we've eaten," Lisa said, stoically.

"You mean this ability to draw is from some artist I ate?"

"Not from just eating one of his or her body parts or taking a bite from that person's flesh. In order for your body to assimilate the talent or ability into itself, you had to eat that person's brain."

"Oh Christ!" Vanessa's breakfast shot back up her esophagus, but she forced it down.

"You asked. I'm sorry."

"How—how far do these new abilities go?" Vanessa whispered.

Lisa shrugged. "I never cared much for mechanics or football. I was repulsed by both subjects due to the degree of boredom I used to feel towards them. Last week, I had an

inclination to fix something. I can't explain it. It's like I was on automatic pilot as I made sure the outside lot was clear of the infected, and then I drove a pick-up truck into the secure inner-garage before proceeding to take out its engine. I used all the tools necessary and took it apart and rebuilt it before I changed the oil and the brakes. The whole process took me eight hours from start to finish, and I've never seen under the hood of an automobile in my life."

"Wow! That . . . that's amazing."

Lisa looked disgusted. "If you say so." She shifted her gaze to the window to stare out at nothing.

"I haven't thought much about anything except for this new desire to draw, but since you mentioned you had urges you've never had before I think I'm starting to understand."

Lisa raised her eyebrows.

"I find that I want to sing constantly, which really is nothing because everyone sings or hums to themselves every now and then, but one urge that's even stranger is this desire to write. I feel like I need to write something, but I don't know what. I feel like I'll go nuts if I don't get whatever it is off my chest by putting pen to paper."

Lisa paled and then gathered her trash. "I need to start my shift. You take your time before taking on any assignments, you hear? And keep an eye on Hargraves."

"Lisa, wait. What did I say?"

She headed toward the door and turned back to Vanessa, shaking her head.

"I can't tell you. You'll have to remember on your own, and when you do please remember I'm here for you. I'll check on you later."

Vanessa was dumbfounded and more confused than ever. She decided to spend the rest of the day snooping while pretending to re-orient herself with the building. By nine o'clock, it was dark and fatigue had overtaken her again.

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Vanessa woke screaming from a night terror. She found herself wrapped in her sheets soaked in sweat. The horrible dream was vivid but already fading from memory. Fragments remained and her heartbeat rapidly as part of the nightmare came

back. She had been chained to a wall being raped by something that looked like a demon, but it had Hargraves face and his stupid grotesque smile.

The dream shifted to her husband pointing a gun at her and pleading for her to stop. Before he fired, their daughter, Sara, jumped in front of her and told her husband not to shoot because she loved Mommy. The bullet blew their daughter's head apart making Kyle drop the gun and run to the girl before everything went black.

The darkness seemed to consume her as she turned on the lamp next to her bed. She took her pajamas off and then stripped the sheets. The clock read 2:14am yet she felt wide awake.

She couldn't let go of what Lisa told her, so she decided to put the information from the previous afternoon's reconnaissance to use. She dressed in sweatpants with a matching Atlanta Falcons hoodie before putting on her tennis shoes. Then she took the keys she found in her office desk and left the room.

The search of her office turned up all kinds of files and notes of what the group had done with the new Curen, but none of the information she wanted. She noticed a key on her keyring labeled: HARGRAVES.

She tiptoed to his office and found the door unlocked and the desk lamp on. She heard a voice and peered inside. Hargraves' desktop computer was off, but he was talking to someone on a laptop set up on the secondary desk behind his main one.

"Yes sir. The subjects in this building are still clean and continual testing shows we are immune against all forms of the COVID virus," Hargraves told the screen.

Who was he talking to? Vanessa wondered. As far as she knew, everyone else in the world except for the people in the building was dead or infected. She crept closer and put her ear to the cracked door.

" . . .right. We've only had three successful reverts since Doctor O'Hagan returned to us and we're continuing to monitor them closely. The prognosis is that one of them won't make it."

A computerized voice said: "How are the abilities progressing?"

"Fine, sir. We're seeing new developments every day. I've been logging them as instructed and will upload them to you by tomorrow night. Several of us are becoming more than we ever thought we could. It's amazing."

"Very well," the synthesized voice replied. "It's 0230 hours. Sign off and reestablish comms tomorrow morning at 0300 hours. Out."

Hargraves closed out of the Zoom program and shut down the computer. She hid in a lab across the hallway waiting for him to leave. Finally, Hargraves shut and locked his office door as he left.

She unlocked Hargraves' office with her own key and slipped inside. She turned on his desktop and was surprised to find no passcode needed to access his files. Then she figured with no threat of corporate espionage, there wasn't much need for electronic security. The laptop was gone, and she couldn't find it in any of Hargraves' drawers or cabinets. He must have it hidden in a secret compartment somewhere.

Vanessa opened the Documents folder and scrolled through the files not knowing what she was looking for. She pulled up three files named *Curen Results*, *Changes*, and *Reversion*. It was too dangerous to stay in the office for the hours needed to read through all the information. She printed the documents before shutting everything down and took the stack of warm paper back to her room.

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"Vanessa! What in the hell are you doing?" Ron Hargraves screamed.

Vanessa stood in a lab full of doctors and researchers pointing a Colt .45 automatic at Hargraves' chest. Before drawing the weapon, she dropped the thick stack of pages on the counter behind her.

"Tell them," Vanessa ordered.

"What are you talking about?"

"Tell them what went wrong. How you were paid to tamper with the newest generation of Curen and cause the end of the world at the government's desire to create the super-human."

"Okay," Hargraves said as he licked his lips. "You're suffering from some kind of delusion that could be from the reversion process. We can work this out."

"No delusions have ever been documented before or during reversion," Lisa Gentry said from across the room.

"Tell them! Tell them the truth and I promise to kill you quickly, you son-of-a-bitch. If you don't, I'll use at least six of these bullets to cause you an unbelievable amount of pain."

"Come on, Vanessa. You don't want to do this."

She thumbed the hammer back and held the gun with both hands.

"Okay, okay. The government paid me to introduce their own genetic altering retrovirus into the Curen sample. I swear I didn't know what it would do. I was as shocked at turning into a cannibal as the rest of you."

"Is that why you give them a report every night in the wee hours of the morning on a laptop linked to a satellite? Which government agency put you up to this? How many people are left alive in the country? How could you let it break out when you found out what it was doing?" Vanessa yelled her questions in a raged succession before he could answer the first.

"It was for the greater good," Hargraves said, calmly. "You don't know—you haven't seen what we're becoming, what we could be as a species."

"He's right," Mitch Soren said. "Look at this." He picked up a stainless-steel chair and bent all the legs into the

center. He almost had them tied into a knot when one of the ends of the legs broke off in his hand. "I feel like I'm getting stronger by the day."

"Don't start with this," Lisa said. "We don't know what the long-term effects are or if we'll even survive the changes that come. It may look like we're becoming super-humans now, but we've all been duped into ending the human race."

Hargraves licked his lips again and said: "That's a bit extreme, don't you think?"

"Not considering how the abilities are obtained," Vanessa answered with tears streaming down her face. "Enough of my memory came back last night and this morning. You told me my family was dead, but you didn't tell me how."

"Because I didn't know fo—"

"Shut up. You did too, or you wouldn't have asked me about my drawings. My son, Jimmy, was an excellent artist. My daughter, Sara, sang constantly, and my husband, Kyle, was a writer. I now possess all those abilities which I never had before. You infected me and sent me home to eat my family!"

Sweat broke out on Hargraves' forehead. "I know you're upset. But with what few people are left in the world, do you really want to murder me? I'm needed here. You all need me."

"So you can infect us with the government's next ingenious idea?" Vanessa's anger prevented her from steadying the gun.

"I think the man's a pig, Vanessa, but he's right. Don't do this," Lisa told her.

Vanessa never took her eyes from Hargraves. A sob escaped as she shook her head and said, "How could you orchestrate something as heinous as people eating people? You are beyond despicable."

"You don't understand what we can—"

"You made me eat my children!"

Her expression changed to cold resolve as she wiped tears from her cheeks. From seven feet away, she fired five rounds into Hargraves' chest. The other sixteen people put their hands over their ears and dropped to the floor as Hargraves' body slammed into the wall behind him and slid down.

Lisa stepped forward and asked Vanessa to put the gun down. Vanessa smiled but shook her head.

"How can any of you live with this?"

Vanessa looked into her best friend's eyes and mouthed the words *love you*, and then placed the pistol's barrel against her own temple and pulled the trigger.