

Now the ants were all over the sidewalk. David scoffed. He'd told his wife to take care of them and this was how she did it? He loped down the front step and onto the walk, bending to squint at them.

Not that he needed to squint at them—the entire mass stretched all the way across the width of the concrete, the corpses of a few stragglers strewn in the grass. It was like they had conducted some sort of tiny exodus, scrambling out on dying legs. David felt his lip curl. He stood and scuffed his shoe in the pile, making a streaky dent in the prickly river. What lousy excuse for poison had his wife used, anyway? Sure, it killed them, but now he had to look at them.

He straightened his tie and continued on to his car. He'd have to scold her when he got home from work. She was still in bed, so he'd tell her to sweep them up later.

He'd just opened the car door when he heard a soft tapping. It came from the house, the screen door being pawed at by... his son. He clenched his jaw, squeezing his eyes shut and sucking in a cold breath of 6 a.m. air before walking back up the step. The kid was likely to run off if David didn't give him a goodbye.

The boy peered up at him, his moon-shaped face blank and mournful. His pudgy hand patted on the screen. It wobbled in response. *Pab, wowm... Pab-pab, wowwm...*

“Go back to bed.” The child pouted, but tottered back upstairs.

David watched him half-crawl up the steps, then turned and strode back to his car. He was going to be late—his shoes skidded on the path. The ants. David's stomach churned, but he didn't have time to waste on revulsion. He got in the car and headed for the Institution.

The building was as vast and vacant-looking as ever, but as David pulled into the complex, he caught glimpses of lab coats darting around inside. He frowned, squinting despite the heavy cloud cover. Those were lab coats running.

The normally barren atrium was bustling with frantic energy, and as soon as he entered it, someone caught him by the arm and yanked him aside.

“You’re coming with our team today, Richmond.” It took David a moment to recognize Head Anomalist White.

“Pardon?”

White quirked an eyebrow. “Hello, Richmond, good morning. You’re with our team today. That supermarket in Sector Five went into a tailspin half an hour ago and we’re on emergency reconnaissance.”

“Already? How did it shake out?”

White gestured with his clipboard, his eyes roving. “Necrotizing hallucinogenic. Was hoping for a standard Q-code, but no such luck. We’ll have a mess to clean up after we make the first pass. Speaking of—” White flung his wrist to his shrewlike face, tugging his sleeve up to uncover a watch. “The helicopter will be coming for us... now.”

He snapped his clipboard under his arm and strode away from David. David had to scramble to keep up with him.

“What was the hold-up?” White asked, glancing back at David without slowing in pace.

“Son. He decided today was the day to wake up early.”

White laughed dryly, and pushed through a door to the helicopter pad. The chopper was already there, its blades whirling and gusting David back a step. White shouted something that David couldn’t hear, and they boarded and got strapped in. David barely got settled before they

took off with a lurch. Bracing himself on anything that seemed stable, David wrangled his intercom set.

“It isn’t far,” White crackled over the speaker. “But we’ll have to hover for a while to get specs. Then we’re down for on-site assessment, clean-up, and back out again within an hour.”

David nodded, squinting in the sharp sunlight. There were a few other professionals in the aircraft, all mute and unidentifiable. Who was in White’s team, anyway? Quite a few of them looked like women.

“There it is.”

David dropped his bleary gaze to the anomaly. From here, it looked like any other supermarket. Perfectly normal. Most anomalies looked that way, unless they were particularly severe. But hadn’t White said this was a severe one? David blinked and saw it.

There were bodies. A whole river of them jetted out of the building, splayed out wide as if there had been some sort of explosion. A tangled mass sat densely at the front doors, and slowly dissipated as the corpses straggled all the way out into the parking lot. Maybe explosion wasn’t quite the word for it; the group looked frantic, but self-propelled. Like some sort of tiny— The helicopter began its descent, and David felt his innards writhe.

Like some sort of tiny exodus.

David felt curdled. The ants. White made some comment, but he knew if he opened his mouth to reply, the dull coffee and toast from this morning’s breakfast would wriggle out of him in sodden streaks. He would not vomit in front of his coworkers. There was no way he would make himself into another one of these sickly-patterned scenes: ants on the concrete, bodies on the asphalt, cowardly vomit on a new suit.

White shoved a mess of industrial cloth and corrugated tubing against David’s chest.

“If you’re feeling queasy, best to dump it all now. Won’t have a chance to once you’re inside.”

The helicopter landed, and David unbundled what White had handed him. A hazmat suit and mask. David began to drag himself into it.

“I’m serious, Richmond. If that mask comes off once you’re in, you’re dead.”

David ignored him, banishing any trace of queasiness from his demeanor and zipping himself into the suit. The mask was complicated, but once on, David felt more secure. He was sealed, locked down, in control of his own body. A few moments more of prep, then they disembarked. The team broke open a display window to gain access—the front doors were completely blockaded by the... exodus.

As long as David didn’t look down, he was fine. He could see the bodies in his peripheral vision, but he could ignore them there. He knew he had to analyze the bodies for circumstantial signs of death, but he took it upon himself to focus on finding the anomalous source. Considering the size of the store, it had to be somewhere close.

His breath returning hot against his face, he tottered through aisles that were glazed over with a film that almost shined. The bodies were nigh-reflective, too: in the flickering fluorescents, their clothes looked something more like carapaces. Chitinous. David’s breath smelled sour.

Perhaps in the freezer section, at the very back. The film seemed to be getting thicker as he moved forward. He could pretend it looked like ice back here, because of the cold, which was more comforting. The people here were only chilled and drowsy. Hypothermic. They could be revived, sure. David bent to inspect one.

It was a little boy.

David smiled tightly to seal his mouth off as his stomach surged again. The child was encrusted with the sparkling film, his moon-shaped face pallid and rotting at every edge, the corners of his tiny mouth bruised crystalline and the waterline of his eyes blackened and sharp, his cheeks mottled and silent, his pudgy fingers curled like spindly jointed limbs in insectoid rigor mortis. David's throat burned, his own breath stung his eyes and the vomit crept up his chest, kissing his back teeth as he stumbled backwards, catching himself with his hands stretched back, his thickly-gloved fingers landing with a crunch that made him spin to find a caved-in rib cage and his rubberized palms dusted with sparkling powder, bits of bone, congealed viscera—

David used his dirtied and boneless fingers to scrabble the mask off his face before hacking his breakfast onto the glistening linoleum.

He gasped in a breath of frigid air.

He heaved twice, three times, seeing the splattering sound of his cowardice more than hearing it.

Blurry words took shape in the background.

*Did you—*

*—Richmond!*

*The boy—*

The boy.

His lungs felt blissfully clear, even with the tang of acid on his tongue.

The boy.

His boy.

David's chest was a screen door, his esophagus pawing and reverberating.

*Pab, wowm...*

He needed to help his boy.

*Pab-pab, wowwm...*

His boy was waiting for a goodbye, his boy was waiting for him.

*Pab, wowm... pab, wowm...*

He needed to go home.

He stood, the aisles rocking, his body being gripped and grasped at, hands covering his face, bile dripping from his chin.

His boy. His wife was waiting for him.

He clawed his way over a mountain of sharp, crisp edges, the insides of his elbows and the corners of his mouth crackling. His fingers curled around thick shells of clothing for purchase and froze there. His dying legs didn't even carry him out to the concrete.