

Brainless

Lily Idle

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Leala had to bash in her grandmother-in-law's skull. She was left no other choice.

It had been a peaceful picnic. Leala chose a lovely spot at a beautiful park beneath several large oak and pine trees. She had covered two oversized concrete picnic tables in a vast array of food. Sunlight snuck its way through gaps in the foliage casting dappled light and shadows onto the tables. The fragrant smell of pine and freshly mown grass hovered in the subtle breeze. Leala rushed to put something heavy atop the pile of napkins, her long blonde hair rustling in the wind.

"It looks perfect," Damon said putting his arms around his new wife who was obsessively straightening plates.

The Mitchell family trickled in. Leala, their newest member, greeted them all jovially. She hadn't spoken to a member of her own family in over six years and did her best to hide her eagerness to please her new one.

Grandma Mitchell arrived last, arm in arm with Grandpa Mitchell and a nurse from Autumn Gardens Retirement Home. Autumn Gardens had agreed a day in the park with the family would do Grandma a world of good, perhaps even ease out some of her recent muscle stiffness.

Damon tossed a football around with his three large gym-rat cousins. Their bulging muscles in their sleeveless shirts dwarfed Damon's toned build. Leala watched her husband, his chin length brown hair pulled back into the smallest bun.

When lunch time arrived, everyone complimented Leala on the incredible spread. Leala

shrugged it off, citing her work as nothing, not mentioning her hours of prep.

Leala walked over to the grandparents and offered to bring them plates.

“I’ll get them,” the nurse said, untangling herself from the picnic table bench and standing.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Leala said.

“It’s okay,” said the nurse smiling. “I know what she likes and she’s been unusually quiet today. I’m afraid she probably has another migraine. They’ve become severe these past few months.”

Grandma Mitchell stared silently at the table.

“One of everything for me!” Grandpa Mitchell shouted after the nurse who waved a thumbs up over her shoulder.

Leala looked closely at her Grandmother-in-law, noticing the green-grey tint to her skin. Leala didn’t recall it looking that way when Grandma arrived. Leala decided it must be the dappled light in the grass reflecting on her pale skin. Yet it seemed to be changing, growing greener and more grey before her eyes. Leala noticed how Grandma dug her long fingernails into the picnic table and the vacant look in her foggy eyes. She seemed to be emitting a low grumbling sound, a sort of quiet growling. A bit of drool oozed from the side of her mouth with what looked like blood in it.

“You okay, dear?” Grandpa asked Leala.

“Everybody good?” Damon asked and put an arm around Leala’s shoulder, kissing the side of her head which only just reached his shoulder.

“I was just about to tell your lucky lady that someday you two will be the old couple at the park.”

Damon laughed and Leala gave a half hearted smile, eyes still locked on Grandma.

“You okay, babe?” Damon asked.

“I–” Leala started but was interrupted by Grandma who lunged toward her husband and sunk her teeth deep into his neck.

He started to yell but instead let out a small gurgling noise.

“What the hell! Grandma, no!” Damon shouted.

He ran around the table and tried to drag the gnashing body of his Grandma from the collapsing form of his Grandpa. Leala followed and grabbed Grandma’s long grey hair, pulling firmly while Damon tugged at her shoulders.

Together they heaved the woman from her husband and off the park bench. Grandma leapt up and spun with alarming speed. She latched her long fingers around Damon’s neck, arms fully extended due to Damon’s height. She snapped and tried to drag Damon toward her. Damon pushed against Grandma’s surprising strength, gasping for breath. Leala latched her hands on Grandma’s shoulders trying to tear her off Damon, screaming for help like a lost child at an amusement park.

Damon’s three cousins raced to Leala’s aid. They heaved on Grandma who snapped her jaw furiously with a resounding clacking sound, a hyena closing in on its kill.

“Hold on, Damon!” Leala shouted.

Leala ducked away in search of something, anything that might help. Her eyes fell on Grandpa Mitchell’s cane with its heavy brass handle in the shape of a tiger’s head. She grabbed the cane and turned. She hesitated for just a second.

They’ve been together over seventy years. That thing isn’t Grandma, Leala thought. She felt goosebumps rise on her skin.

“Duck! Duck now!” Leala shrieked at the cousins running back toward Damon.

Gripping the middle of the cane, she swung it with the force of a game winning hit at a World Series. The tiger head collided with the back of Grandma’s head. A sickening crack echoed through the park. Grandma’s grip slackened and she crumpled to the ground. Damon collapsed into his cousins’ arms. They lowered him down onto the grass. Leala dropped the cane and knelt beside him as he caught his breath.

“Grandpa?” Damon gasped.

They all looked over and saw Grandpa on the ground, eyes staring wide. Damon’s mom sobbed on her knees beside his head. The nurse knelt stunned, a dropped plate of food on either side of her.

Sirens arrived shortly after. To Leala’s great relief, every Mitchells’ statement supported her and Damon’s story.

“It was just so strange,” Leala told a police officer, her eyes on the paramedics examining Damon’s neck. “It was like she turned into a zombie.”

. . .

It has been five months since the first documented event involving a sufferer of the immortavirus. The infamous Immorta Picnic Incident brought the virus to widespread attention. Since that time, over 450,000 cases of IMVID-26 have been documented worldwide marking a pandemic the likes of which the world has not seen since the Spanish Influenza of 1918. An additional 120,000 have been infected directly through contact with those suffering the full effects of the immortavirus – a state the experts call “Complete

Psychopathic Degeneration.”

In a state of Complete Psychopathic Degeneration, or CPD, subjects lose all cognizance of themselves. They cannot understand speech or be reasoned with. They are incredibly dangerous. As some put it, they are entirely brainless. The onset of CPD is estimated to range between two to eight months. The longest sufferer has kept CPD at bay for over eleven months.

Symptoms of IMVID-26 begin with severe cluster migraines, joint stiffness, and sluggish brain functionality which all increase in severity as time passes. Memory loss and a heightened olfactory sense indicate further progression of the disease.

Immense controversy exists surrounding what to do when you encounter one suffering from CPD. Federal law has declared that it is not a crime to kill someone in a state of CPD as it is a measure of self-defense. Some argue that since the sufferer was a person, they therefore deserve protection. A few have gone so far as to build secure structures to contain loved ones in a state of CPD.

Unfortunately, most experts agree that once an individual enters CPD, there is little to no chance of reversing the effects. They posit the cure that will save those in earlier stages of IMVID-26 will prove ineffective on those who have reached CPD. Experts agree that once the heart has stopped and the blood has congealed, the effects are permanent.

“Hey, babe. Do you know where my quarter is?” Damon asked.

“Hmm?” Leala said, glancing up from the paper.

“My small apple box. Have you seen it?”

“I think it’s in the hall closet,” Leala said and returned to her article.

A widely suggested though certainly controversial safety precaution includes the

purchase of a handgun to protect against attack by one suffering CPD. Gun sales have skyrocketed in all fifty states as gun protection measures continue to loosen. Open carry is now legal without a license in all states except California, Washington, Minnesota, and New York.

International research cooperation has reached a historically unheard of high with countries like England, China, Russia, and the United States working closely together toward a vaccination for the immortavirus and a cure for those already infected.

Researchers shared high hopes that the vaccine will be ready for public use within the next two months. However, they seem no closer to developing a treatment or cure for those already suffering symptoms of the immortavirus.

“It’s not there,” Damon called.

“Under the bed maybe?” Leala said.

She uncrossed her ankles on the dark wooden coffee table and recrossed them. Damon huffed his way to the bedroom. Leala rolled her eyes and returned them to the page.

Concerns over Russia’s continued willingness to collaborate in research efforts surfaced Wednesday with Russia’s instigation of its Safeguard Protocol. This new law requires all those exhibiting symptoms of the immortavirus to submit themselves to a government facility for their safety and the safety of others. China, Italy, and Bulgaria have made motions to follow Russia’s example and enact similar legislation.

The President spoke out against these actions but there is discussion in both the Senate and the House of Representatives about implementing a similar measure within the United States. Should Congress and the White House move forward with such a measure, there is no telling how the American people will react.

“Do you think they’ll do it?” Leala asked Damon as he walked back into the living room, his apple box in one hand. “Oh good, you found it.”

“Do what?”

“Lock the sick people up,” Leala said.

“I dunno, babe,” Damon said, placing the apple box on the floor and sitting down on the couch beside Leala. “I guess maybe?”

“There’s no need to be so decisive,” Leala said with a smile.

Damon laughed and pulled Leala toward him.

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Leala walked into her apartment and dropped her purse and grocery bags on the ground beside the door. She quickly closed and bolted the door. She tossed her keys onto the kitchen counter which jutted out and divided the open kitchen from the dining and living room. The spacious modernist floor plan with its tall ceilings, vibrant colors, and ample screenprints and photographs on the walls gave the apartment the feel of a homey art museum. Two bedrooms led off from the large open living area. One that had previously functioned as Damon’s photo studio now doubled as Leala’s classroom ever since schools switched to digital learning at the start of the immortavirus pandemic.

Leala plopped down on their soft blue couch and kicked her feet up onto the coffee table. She turned on the TV.

“Hey, baby,” Damon said walking out of their bedroom.

“Hey, babe,” Leala said, looking up from the TV. “You okay?”

Damon rubbed his neck with his right hand. He held their microwavable heat pack in his left.

“Yeah, it’s just my neck,” Damon said. “I must have hurt it shooting Sunday.”

He sat down gingerly on the couch beside her, his feet joining hers on the edge of the coffee table.

She placed her hand tenderly on his cheek and kissed him. Her engagement ring with its silver band and fire opal glinted in the warm light from their sleek silver chandelier above. Leala leaned back and continued to flick through channels.

“Let’s put on a movie,” Damon suggested.

“Absolutely. I just wanna see...” Leala trailed off as she landed on the news.

They both read the banner beneath the talking heads.

President Decrees Involuntary Seizure of All Symptomatic Citizens.

“I don’t believe it,” Damon said.

The hand rubbing his neck froze in place as Leala unmuted the TV.

“Just moments ago, the Commander in Chief gave a briefing where he announced the opening of facilities to house all individuals exhibiting symptoms of IMVID-26. He assured citizens this measure is for their safety and the safety of those suffering from the disease. He guaranteed the implementation of a careful organization system where those suffering different phases of IMVID-26 will be housed ‘like with like.’ How effective can we expect that organization system to be?” the news host asked turning to her guest, a social structure specialist.

“We can expect the separation to be fairly haphazard, in all honesty,” the specialist said calmly, but Leala could see panic brewing behind his dark eyes. “You see, the fact is that the

immortavirus symptoms manifest differently person to person. The facilities will require extremely close professional monitoring and consistent reshuffling in order to successfully house 'like with like' as the President put it. It will not be easy to achieve this goal."

"Thank you," the host said and addressed her other guest, the head of the Psychology Graduate Program at Harvard University. "Now in terms of compliancy, what can we expect from the American people?"

"Well the thing that cannot go understated here is the factor of *fear*. The immortavirus is a truly terrifying virus unlike anything we have seen in human history. I honestly believe that this action by the President may come as a great relief for many Americans."

"What do you expect to see happen next?" the host asked.

"I expect we will see many people turn their loved ones into these new facilities. I also expect we will see a large number of people turning *themselves* in to protect those they love, quite possibly against the wishes of their loved ones. However, I also fear that a large amount of Americans will attempt to hide themselves or their family members out of a mistrust for the safety of the facilities," the woman replied.

"A mistrust that is not unfounded considering what little we know about the Protective Housing at this point," the news host said.

"This is madness," Leala said tearing her eyes away from the screen.

She looked at Damon who had his eyes closed and his noise-cancelling headphones on.

Leala sighed and tapped Damon gently on his shoulder.

"I know the world's on fire," he said, eyes still closed. "I have a really bad migraine and don't need to watch it burn."

"You have a migraine?" Leala asked.

“It’s because of my neck,” Damon said, sliding his headphones down. “When it’s this stiff it can trigger migraines.”

“Yeah, that must be it,” Leala said feeling suddenly chilled.

She leaned against Damon’s shoulder. She could hear his classical music resounding softly from the headphones beside her head. Damon put his arm around her and Leala rested her face against his chest, grateful he could not see her expression.

“I’m gonna go back into bed,” Damon said.

He lifted his arm from around Leala and she sat up. He kissed her and stood slowly, using the arm of the couch as support. Leala watched Damon as he shuffled into the bedroom.

Leala stood up and went to unload the groceries she had forgotten about.

It’s probably nothing, Leala thought as she slid the eggs into the fridge.

“It’s safe to say we have a lot more we need to learn about the Immorta Protective Housing than what information the President just released,” the Harvard professor on the TV said.

“And about the virus itself,” said the news host.

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“Could you pass the salt, my love?” Leala asked at dinner a month after Damon’s first incurable migraine.

The stiffness in his neck hadn’t eased and had spread to his upper back.

Damon looked up from his bowl of chicken noodle soup, all he could stomach through

the nausea that accompanied his migraines. He picked up the salt and sniffed it.

"It smells funny," he said as he passed it to her.

"It smells funny?" Leala asked as she took the grinder from him.

"Yeah. Like it's moldy. Maybe it's gone off or something. Can table salt go off?"

"You can *smell* the *salt*?" Leala asked and sniffed the shaker.

"Can't you?" Damon asked nervously.

Leala didn't answer. She lowered the salt grinder to the table. She could hear her heartbeat and had suddenly somehow sunk underwater. Damon lowered his spoon. It clinked against the side of the bowl and sank until the soup covered half the handle.

Neither spoke for some time.

"I'm going," Damon said finally, standing. "I'm packing my bags and turning myself in."

"What?" Leala shrieked, jumping to her feet. Her knee clunked against the table but she hardly noticed. "You are doing no such thing, Damon Mitchell."

"I have to. I have to protect you."

He walked around the table and headed quickly for the bedroom. Leala followed closely behind.

"How can putting yourself in danger possibly protect me from pain? How can I live knowing you might be locked up with people who've gone brainless?"

Damon pulled his hard shell carry-on suitcase from under the bed.

"Damon, stop!" Leala shouted as he tossed it on their lavender comforter and unzipped it.

"What choice do I have, Leala?" Damon asked, meeting her eyes as she rounded the mattress.

They stood on opposite sides of their plush queen-sized bed. Damon turned and opened a dresser drawer. He grabbed a stack of shirts and tossed them unceremoniously into the open suitcase. As soon as he turned back to the dresser, Leala tore the shirts from the suitcase and threw them on the ground. Damon turned back around.

“Leala...” he said.

“No!” Leala shrieked. “People are dying in there, Damon! They’re getting eaten alive with nowhere to run! And you want me to just let you go knowing you could be next? They’re going to find a cure!”

Damon said nothing, but placed his second stack of shirts into the once more empty suitcase. Leala grabbed them and they joined their fellows on the hardwood floor.

“Leala...” Damon repeated again, a parent appeasing an obstinate child.

“It isn’t supposed to go like this,” Leala said with a stomp of her foot.

She brought her hands to her face and felt hot tears striking her palms. Damon’s arms wrapped around her. Leala’s mind suddenly wandered to Grandpa and Grandma Mitchell and their seventy years together. She thought of how it had ended. She lowered her arms and wrapped them around Damon, resting her face against his chest.

“You’re the only family I have,” Leala whispered.

After what felt like a long while, Damon said, “If I forget your name, you have to promise to let me go.”

Leala looked up at him. His tear tracks matched her own.

“I promise,” she said.

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Two weeks after Damon's "disappearance," a successful vaccination for the immortavirus became available for widespread use. Pharmaceutical companies pumped out the little chemicals by the thousands. People clambered over each other in their desperation for protection from the disease that had directly claimed the lives of almost 150,000 Americans and indirectly 40,000 more.

Leala always thought "indirectly" was too delicate a way of saying "eaten alive."

At Damon's insistence Leala's took a newly-developed immunity test which came back positive.

"See, I'm totally safe," she said, holding up the results like a child showing a parent their shiny gold star.

"Yeah, unless—"

"Nuh-uh-uh," Leala interrupted, wagging her finger. "No 'unless.' We still have time."

Though the days dragged by slowly, the months passed quickly since the night of the salt incident. When Damon's family and friends called or came by to see him, Leala told them tearfully that he had left her without a word. On these occasions, Damon holed up in the bedroom, blinds drawn, until his loved one departed. Leala's few friends knew her better than to press their support on her.

Leala ordered sound proofing supplies from four different websites to defer any potential suspicion. She debated buying a drum set as a cover for the materials but decided that if anyone came for them, a drum kit would hide nothing.

Damon helped her as much as he could. He even occasionally got up the strength to cook her dinners he did not have the stomach to eat. They'd sit on the couch and play board

games or watch cheesy action films to see a world where the heroes inevitably triumph in the end.

We were so close, Leala lamented on the bad days. The days when Damon's body felt so stiff he could hardly swallow the plain broth she fed him. The days when his head ached so fiercely he would scream out and Leala had to console him and threaten playfully, though often with serious intent, to tape his mouth shut.

Six weeks from his first symptoms and the vaccine becomes available. We were so close.

The Government had made it a federal offense to conceal anyone exhibiting symptoms of the immortavirus. The Senate, the House, the Democrats, the Republicans, the President, for once they all somehow agreed.

So Leala "shh"ed and cooed and pleaded and eventually Damon would quieten.

They already had bars over any window larger than a dinner plate – everyone had installed those at the start of the pandemic. Leala added the same kind of metal bar deadbolt that slid across their front door to the inside of her digital classroom door. Even their shower resembled a prison cell. Leala had read on an online forum about the importance of an impenetrable space should someone with CPD enter your home.

"With the bars on your windows and front door, this honestly seems a little unnecessary," the contractor reassured her.

"I'd rather be overprotected," she said and smiled as she handed him a check.

She put an emergency cell phone on a shelf in the fortress shower.

"Now is this to lock me up or you?" Damon asked when the workmen had left, shaking a bar to find it didn't wiggle.

“Who knows?” Leala said and shrugged, feeling a bit manic. “Let’s not find out.”

In case, she told herself. Just in case.

Daily she read news articles of people in the Immorta Protective Housing going “full zombie,” as her middle school students called it, and attacking those who had not yet reached CPD. The government couldn’t guarantee anyone’s safety.

“Like with like” my ass, Leala thought.

Leala dreaded bolting the door for work and leaving Damon alone. She dreaded what she might emerge to. And though every passing day increased her danger, she could still not bring herself to turn him in.

I’m doing the right thing, Leala repeatedly told herself. I don’t have any choice.

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Leala entered the apartment. Her few simple errands had taken longer than she expected. She slid the long deadbolt bar across the door and dropped assorted bags onto the ground.

“Baby! I have incredible news!” Leala shouted. “You’ll never believe it!”

She tossed her keys onto the long kitchen counter. They skidded to a stop beside an envelope with the words “My Love” written upon it in Damon’s elegant script. She raced over and pulled out the note, holding her breath.

I don’t remember your name or even my own, but I know that I love you. I know you are my entire world. I cannot bear the thought that I might hurt you. I have turned myself in. I know you do not want this, but we are out of options. I am out of time. Please forgive me. I

love you with every atom of my atrophying being.

Leala lowered the note and placed her shaking hands upon the cool kitchen counter. She felt as though she floated above her body. She looked down at the person beneath her clutching the final goodbye like a lifeline.

The bedroom door banged open, hitting the opposite wall. Leala spun around. Damon emerged through the doorway. Relief flooded through her.

“You didn’t go....”

She trailed off as Damon’s head snapped up.

His hollow eyes met hers. They were *wrong*, bloodshot and vacant. His prominent cheeks had sunken in. Flesh dripped off his cheekbones like petals on a dying flower left unwatered for too long. His jaw hung loosely, blood and drool pouring from his open maw. His arms hung down limply at his side as though gravity had become too much for them, the skin a grotesque grey-green. A low rumbling growl resounded from him, growing louder.

Leala and Damon had run through this scenario countless times. At his insistence, they had taped small pistols under the kitchen counter and dining room table. One sat in a drawer beside the bed and another on a tray beneath the couch.

“If you can’t reach the shower, you have to get to a gun,” Damon said over and over.

But as the thing Damon had become charged across the living room with an impressive agility for one previously so stiff, all Leala could think was *no!*

Damon leapt across the coffee table and over the back of the couch, his torso colliding with Leala. The force of the blow pushed them both up onto the kitchen counter. They slid across it dragging a few dirty dishes, a vase of flowers, and the knife block down onto the kitchen floor beside them. They landed amidst shattering glass and porcelain.

Leala's right shoulder and forearm hit the cold tile floor sending shooting pains down her arm. Her adrenaline pumped so furiously it enabled her to push herself so she sat upright, but so did Damon. He leapt forward. She caught his shoulders with both hands and held him an arm's reach away, elbows locked. The force of his attack slid her up against the under-counter cabinets. The cabinet's metal handle dug into the middle of her back but went mostly unnoticed through her panic.

"Damon, stop!" Leala shrieked.

Damon thrashed wildly, jaws gnashing, eyes crazed. He pushed fiercely toward her. He did not have a great mastery of his arms which swung around haphazardly beside him. Leala considered this lucky. Some - like Grandma - transformed fully coordinated. His right shoulder appeared to have dislocated from the fall.

"Damon, please!" Leala screamed.

Leala looked up and saw her white-handled pistol taped to the underside of the counter. It lay just beyond her reach. Damon thrust forward and his jaws snapped inches from her face. The smell of Damon's rotting flesh mingled with the leftovers from last night's Indian food scattered on the ground around them.

Leala felt as though she had been fighting Damon for a very long time. As though they had sat here struggling for hours. She looked down at the tile floor as Damon snapped again, this time even closer. Some bloody drool landed on her collarbone.

The rays of the setting sun streaking into the otherwise dim kitchen illuminated the cool floor beneath them.

Have our tiles always had so much blue in them? Leala wondered idly.

Her eyes wandered and landed on the large carving knife Damon gave her for

Christmas. It had partially dislodged from the knife block which had landed on the ground beside her. As Damon pulled back preparing to lunge once more, Leala grabbed the knife with her left hand. She used Damon's forward momentum against him and together they drove the knife deep into his forehead.

Damon's jaws stopped snapping. The face contorted with hunger and rage relaxed. The growling noises cut off abruptly like a CD ejected mid song. Damon fell limp down onto Leala's lap. She kept her arms extended out for a moment before lowering them slowly to her side, Damon's head, knife protruding from it, still in her lap. Some bloody drool had landed on her left hand and covered her engagement ring. She wiped it off on the skirt of her pale yellow dress hardly feeling the slime against her skin at all.

After a few minutes, or what might have been much longer, Leala pushed the corpse off of her. It flopped onto its back, bloodshot eyes staring blankly ahead. Leala got to her feet unsteadily, using the kitchen counter to stabilize herself. The cool surface felt warm against her frigid hands.

She looked down and found surprisingly little blood on her dress.

When one suffers Complete Psychopathic Degeneration, one's heart immediately stops beating. The stagnating blood rapidly begins to congeal which results in little blood loss from inflicted wounds. Eventually the blood solidifies entirely and wounds yield no blood flow whatsoever, Leala's brain supplied clinically.

Leala wobbled her way to the couch and collapsed onto it. She reached for the remote feeling as though someone else's hand held it. The TV turned on and the remote suddenly lay back on the coffee table.

The newscaster with her perfect hair and flawless teeth grinned and said words that

Leala couldn't comprehend.

The banner across the screen read, *Immorta Virus Cure Discovered.*