

The Need To Know

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It's taken me almost ten years to reach this point, but soon I'll have the answer to the question which has been eating away at me ever since the farm house was over-run. That was the last time I'd seen him, and I needed to know whether he, like me, was somehow still alive, even after all this time. I crave for certainty; I yearn for the knowledge of what happened to him; I need to know one way or the other. I know this is something few people ever get now the world has changed, but I know something they don't. I know that if he's still alive, he'll be here on this beach today at sunset, just as he promised he would if we ever got split up. If I find him waiting for me there, we'll finally be re-united, if only for a brief moment before it's all over; and if I don't, I'll know for sure he's dead. Then, at last, I can die knowing he too is gone. Well, I won't actually die, but I'll stop being me, and that will mean I'm as good as dead.

We met at university, where he was doing an engineering degree, and I was studying English literature. It shouldn't have worked, but it did. We were united by a common sense of humour, indie music, and a liking for original series Star Trek. I wouldn't say it was love at first sight, but it was close enough to make no difference, and for the next eight years we spent barely more than the occasional day apart. Even when the outbreak started, our first instinct wasn't to flee, but rather to find each other.

I think this is what made it so difficult when we finally got separated. We were holed up in a remote farm house which overlooked Loch Ness, trying to work out what we should do next. We figured it was safe enough there for the time being, but we still had to be constantly on our guard because even there the occasional infected turned up. Then, one evening, we were over-run. It happened almost without warning, and there was no time for me to find John before I had to turn and flee into the night. All I could do was hope that he had made it out too, and that we'd find each other again.

Those first few days apart were gut-wrenchingly difficult, not knowing whether he was alive or dead, or perhaps worse, but there was little time to dwell on it. Instead, I spent my time running from the infected which seemed to dog my every step. The only thing which kept me

going was the knowledge that I had a way to find out what had happened to him. Well, perhaps not exactly what had happened, but at least whether he was still alive or not. You see, we'd made plans for what we would do if we ever became separated. Rather than wandering around aimlessly searching for each other, we were both to head for a certain beach on the west coast. It was remote, but this meant there would be little chance of there being large numbers of infected there so it would be relatively safe. Yet, try as I might, I couldn't get far enough ahead of the infected that were pursuing me to be able to start making my way west. Instead, I was forced further and further north, and with each passing day, I found myself wondering if John was already there, waiting for me, and the thought started to gnaw at me. I longed to go there, to find out once and for all, but the infected just wouldn't let me.

Eventually, I found a place of safety where I could get time to think. It was right up at the northern tip of Scotland and was the last toe-hold of the remnants of the army units which had been sent in to try to contain the outbreak when it had first started. Even from the start, it had been obvious to these men and women that the disease wasn't something they could hold back, but they fought it none-the-less. Now, as the infected started to mass around their defences, the last few hundred of them were preparing to evacuate in the hope of finding somewhere safer. They knew Britain was lost and they knew their only hope of survival was to get out. I, however, wanted to stay; I needed to stay; I needed to find out whether John was still alive and waiting for me on that remote beach, but again the infected gave me no choice and the only way I could keep myself alive was to leave with the soldiers in the last of the helicopters.

We made the short hop to Norway, but found things were little better there so we pressed on eastward into Russia. We went first to Murmansk, then Omsk, then just north into the Siberian wilderness until we ran out of fuel. Yet, still the infected found us, and we had to keep moving. All the time, I was wondering whether John was waiting for me or not. It wasn't the fact that I might have lost him forever which was eating away at me, but rather the fact that I didn't know for certain and yet there was a way for me to find out.

Eventually, I realised this uncertainty would drive me mad if I didn't do something about it, and that was when I set off. I felt my body change almost immediately. Instead of running from the infected, I was running towards something; it gave me strength and my life purpose. I knew the chances of me making it all the way back were minimal, and that even if I did, I might not find him there, but I would know what that would mean, and I'd finally be able to move on.

That was when I realised our plan was both my saving grace and an albatross around my neck. You see, we'd arranged that if we didn't make it there immediately after we'd become separated, then he'd be on that beach at sunset on the longest day of the year, every year,

without fail, as long as he was still alive. This meant I was continually left wondering whether he might be there waiting for me on that day of each year which past. Yet, even though it tormented me almost constantly, it also gave me hope, and more importantly, it gave me something to live for. That kept me going, even on the darkest days, and there were so many of them in the world of the infected that I quickly lost count.

I can feel myself flagging as I drag my feet through the sand. It's only a couple of hundred more yards, but it's taking every ounce of what little strength I have left to keep going. Under the sleeve of my jacket, I can feel the bite I got this morning burning as if it's on fire. It might just be my imagination, but I swear I can feel the virus rushing through my veins, infecting every part of my body, starting to take it over. Yet, my body's fighting back, trying to halt the unstoppable tide or at least slow the inevitable down long enough for me to find out if he's there or not, to get the closure I so desperately yearn for.

I curse myself again for being so stupid. After all these years and all the miles I'd travelled, I'd let my guard down. I hadn't seen an infected in days and I figured that there probably wasn't any around here, not somewhere so remote and not after all this time. There had been a small wooden shack just above the southern end of the beach which looked so decayed that the next gust of wind might send it crashing to the ground. Its door swung gently on hinges that were threatening to break free at any moment. Still, I wondered if it might give me some shelter while I waited for sunset. I should have been more cautious, but I was so tired and so near the end, and just I wasn't thinking straight.

I'd barely touched the door before the infected shot out of the darkness within. It was so emaciated that I couldn't tell if it had once been a man or a woman, and while the anger still burned in its eyes, its body was weak and wasted. That didn't stop it from knocking me to the ground and biting the arm which I instinctively threw up to protect my face. If I'd still been wearing the old motorcycle jacket I'd picked up in somewhere during my travels, it wouldn't have mattered because its teeth couldn't have punctured the thick leather, but I'd taken it off a few hours before so I could feel the warmth of the mid-summer sun on my skin. I can't believe I was so stupid.

I managed to struggle free and crush the side of its skull with the heavy club I used as a walking stick. Once it stopped moving, I stood there staring at it, trying to work out whether it could have once been John. Its features were sunken, and its skin sallow, making it hard to tell. Given the shape it was in I doubted it would have survived much longer even if I hadn't killed it. I wondered how it had survived so long all the way out here with no one to feed on. Maybe the rumours were

true and the infected would eat other animals if they really had to to stay alive, or maybe this one had only turned quite recently. That got me back to wondering whether it had once been John. Using the toe of my boot, I turned it onto its back and was relieved to see it lacked the distinctive Pictish Beast tattoo John had had done when he was drunk at music festival the summer before he started university. Yet, there was a hint of sadness too.

I understood why I felt relieved it wasn't him, but the sadness was harder to explain. Maybe it was because part of me wanted it to be him so that I'd finally know what had happened to him; maybe it was because I knew I didn't have much time left and I feared that I was never going to find out before I turned. I looked down at the bite on arm. It wasn't deep, but it had broken the skin and there was a trickle of blood running towards my hand. Even though I knew it was pointless, I raced down to the sea and scrubbed the wound with the salty water. It stung like crazy, but it did little more than distract me from what would be happening inside me. I'd seen numerous people turn over the years and it was never the same twice. Some changed pretty much instantly, almost as if just the knowledge they'd been bitten was enough to make them start acting like the infected; others took hours, as if their bodies were somehow able to slow the infection down. Not knowing how long I would have, I pulled on my jacket and set off along the beach, yet almost immediately I could feel the virus starting to act.

The sun's starting to go down, and I'm almost at the far end of the beach. I can barely keep moving, but I know I must go on. I must find out if he's alive or not before I turn. I hear a shout and look up. For a moment, I can't quite believe what I'm seeing, but then I realise it really is him. He's thinner and weather-beaten, but it's definitely him. I feel a smile spread across my face and I try to run to him, but I don't have the energy left in my legs and I fall forward onto the sand. I lie there for a moment, scared to look up again in case it turns out that I'd only imagined seeing him there; then I feel a shadow fall across me, and I turn my head to see him standing over me, holding out his hand. My heart leaps. I take his outstretched hand and pull myself to my feet. For a moment, we just stare at each other, then he throws his arms around me and I do the same to him. We hug for what seems like forever. As we do, I feel his shoulders heaving up and down, and I realise he's crying. This sets me off too and we just stand there holding each other, the tears streaming down our faces.

After a while, we stop hugging quite so tightly and slip down onto the sand. We still hold each other as I tell him all that has happened to

me since the farm house was over-run all those years before. I tell him about how I knew that if he were alive, he'd be here waiting for me, and how this had kept me going all these years. He, in his turn, tells me about the island where he's been living, about the cottage he's built, about how he never gave up hope that one day we might find each other again. He sounds so happy and I want that happiness to last forever, but I know it can't. I know I need to tell him about the bite, about the infection which I can feel taking over my body. I start crying again, this time not from joy but from sadness and pain. He stops speaking and he stares down at me with a confused look on his face, and I know I need to explain.

I wipe my face, 'I can't go with you ...' I can't bring myself to say the next words I need to say and my voice simply fades out.

'Don't be stupid.' He strokes my hair like he always used to. 'Of course you can. You've made it all this way. Finally, we're back together again. It's completely safe, I promise you. I haven't seen an infected on the island in the whole time I've been there. It's got to be one of the safest places in the world ...'

I caress the side of his face and I notice my hand is shaking. He must have noticed it too because he stops speaking again.

'No. I can't.' My voice sounds odd, almost distant and he pulls away from me.

'Why?'

'Because of this.' I pull back the sleeve of my jacket, revealing the ragged red wound. The teeth marks clearly visible against my pale skin. I can see from the look of horror on his face that he knows what it means. For a moment I think he might run away, but instead he holds me tight, 'When did that happen?'

'This morning. I was surprised by one of them. I got it, but not before it got me.'

He says nothing, but I can see the heartbreak in his eyes. I know it will only hurt him further, but I need to ask him something. 'John, I want you to do something for me ...'

Again, I can't seem to get the words out, but he seems to know what it is even before I ask. He kisses me and whispers in my ear, 'Yes. When it's time, I'll do it. I promise. But it's not time yet, is it?'

'No, but it will be soon. I can feel the virus burning through my body. I've been fighting it all day just so I could get here. Just so I'd know for sure if you were still alive or not before I went.' I pause for a moment, leaning my head on his shoulder and staring out to where the last of the sun is just dipping below the horizon. I know I don't have long left, maybe just seconds, yet for the first time in years I'm free of that gnawing thought which kept driving me onwards: I know what happened to the only man I ever truly loved. I'm just happy that he's alive, and that he seems to have found a way of not just surviving, but living in the world of the infected. His island home sounds idyllic and I

wish I could live there with him, but I can't. A wave of sadness washes over me and I start to cry again. I fight back the tears, 'I'm glad I finally found you again, that I'll get to say goodbye to you this time, that I got to hold you one last time, that ...'

I feel my head slip from his shoulder, and even though I know I'm falling, I can't seem to do anything about it. I lie there, feeling the warm sand against my face, my eyes taking in the yellows and reds of the sunset. It starts to fade as the virus finally wins, yet the last thought which runs through my head is that I can die happy because I finally got to find out what happened to him. I just wish it didn't have to end this way. I just wish it wasn't John who was going to have to kill me before I turned into one of them.