

The Labyrinth

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I stare at the row upon row of metal shipping containers stacked three high in the car park of the abandoned hospital. From within, rises a cacophony of banging and clattering, letting me know that those inside can sense my presence. When the disease first hit, before anyone knew it did more than kill, the city's morgues had over-flowed with the freshly dead. For those in charge, the shipping containers must have seemed like an obvious solution: simply stack the bodies inside and then cart them away to some anonymous mass grave when the situation finally starts to ease. Only it didn't; instead it got unimaginably worse. Not only did ever more people become sick and die, but those who were already dead started to come back to life. Well, you couldn't really call it life but they started to move again; and to attack the living, biting at them, tearing their flesh, consuming them even though, being dead, they couldn't digest what they swallowed. Instead, their bellies distended, stretching their sallow, waxy skin until it split, spilling their guts across the ground. You would have thought they might have noticed this, but they didn't, they just kept on hunting and attacking and eating, dragging their insides behind them through the dust.

I know I shouldn't be here, that it's too dangerous but I've no choice. I lean down and gingerly peel back the bandage around my left calf. As I do the stench of rotting flesh hits my nostrils and I almost throw up. I can't believe something so simple is causing me so much pain. All I did was catch my leg on rusty nail as I climbed through a gap in an old wooden fence. I wasn't even escaping from the dead, I was just checking out a garden shed to see if it had anything useful in it, which it didn't. At first I didn't give it a second thought but within a few hours I could feel the wound start to burn as the infection set in. By morning, the lower half of my leg was red and swollen, and foul-smelling puss started to ooze from the gash. At first I feared I'd somehow caught whatever disease it was turning people into the walking dead, but soon I realised it was just your normal everyday infection. I was so relieved I whooped with joy, then the reality of the situation worked its way into my consciousness: I had what was rapidly developing into a severe infection and I needed to start treating it right away. I rummaged through my gear, looking for the old first aid kit I'd picked up in an empty house the previous week. When I finally found it, I was

disappointed to find the only thing in it which was anything close to being useful was a bottle of iodine. Being careful not to waste any, I flush the wound with it every morning and night for the next two days. I hoped it would be enough to sterilise it, but it only seemed to make things worse.

Then I started to smell the characteristic odour of gangrene. It was faint at first but with each passing day it grew stronger and stronger until I could barely manage to remove the bandage and sluice out the wound without being sick. The scent of a gangrenous limb is one of those smells you never really forget, not once you've had your first whiff. Mine was back when I was a medic in the army. I'd entered a house with my platoon leader searching for insurgents, only to find an old man lying on a dirty mattress, his leg missing and the stump wrapped in crude bandages torn from the curtains. I don't know how he lost it, probably an IED or a car bomb, or maybe even one of our shells; out there in those days there were countless ways to lose a limb. As the others searched the house, I knelt down beside the old man and slowly remove the makeshift bandage to see if I could help. He didn't flinch, or even move, and I knew why – he was dying. It was just as well there was nothing I could do for him because the moment the stench of rotting flesh hit me, all I could do was stumble from the house, desperate for fresh air, and throw up for ten minutes straight. By the time I'd got myself together and went back inside, he was dead but I knew I'd never forget that smell no matter how long I lived.

When I smelled it again coming from my own leg, I knew I had to do something or I'd die just like the old man in that house all those years ago. My first thought was to search the local pharmacies, but they'd been cleared of anything useful a long time ago. I double-checked just to make sure but found nothing stronger than a bottle of Paracetamol which had rolled under a shelving unit. I started going further and further afield, hobbling as far as I could each day, but it was the same everywhere. Finally, in absolute desperation, I started to seriously consider going to the hospital. I'd worked there a few years ago and I knew where everything was kept. I also figured the threat of the dead that undoubtedly lurked there, waiting for the living, would mean it might not have been cleaned out yet and there might still be something useful left; maybe some docxy, or amoxicillin or even good old penicillin, any of them would do. After all, you'd have to be mad to even think of going in there. Mad or have absolutely no other options. I put it off for as long as I dared, hoping against hope that my immune system would somehow be able to fight off the infection that was eating through my flesh at an ever-faster rate, but deep down I knew it wouldn't. This morning when I woke, I realised I had to face up to the reality of the situation I found myself in and do what had to be done: I'd either have to try the hospital or amputate, and there was no way I

was going to survive in a world where the dead walked again with only one leg, even if I survived doing such an extreme operation on myself.

I search the spaces between the containers, wondering how many lie in wait for me there. Maybe they're all safely locked away and there's nothing to worry about. Then again, what if someone had got careless and hadn't close a door properly on one of containers after they'd put the last body inside? What if some of the containers were so old that the metal had rusted through? What if in the two months since it all started, the dead inside had managed to buckle the walls and break the welds with their perpetual assaults, freeing themselves from their metal coffins? If any of these, or a hundred other possible scenarios that ran through my head, had happened, the labyrinth between the containers will be crawling with them. Once I enter, there'll be no turning back and all I can do is hope there aren't more than I can handle.

I flinch as I slip the bandage back over my festering wound. It blocks some of the stench, but not all of it, and I can still smell the distinctive odour of my own rotting flesh. Pulling my pistol from my waistband, I remind myself that if I don't get some antibiotics soon I'm going to die anyway. I limp forward, trying to put as little weight on my injured leg as possible. The noise from the dead coming from the containers builds in intensity and ferocity as I draw closer and closer. Slowly I pass into the shadows between the first of the containers, the banging and moaning echoing all around me, not knowing if I'll live long enough to make it to the other side, but knowing I have no other choice.