

The Formerly Infected Humans Support Group

As the crowd shuffled into the dusty old church hall, Richard scanned the faces. He did a little mental register. It was the usual group, give or take a few. "Evening everyone, welcome one and all. You should know the drill by now. Get yourself a drink and find a seat around our little circle."

Following his instruction, they all busied themselves at the side table, fixing themselves terrible tea and coffee in chipped mugs. Crowding around for the best biscuits. Chatting. Slowly, they made their way to the rough circle of mismatched seats and settled in. "No Jonathan again this week?" Richard asked. "Have you seen anything of him, Tracy?"

"Nothing," Tracy said between chocolate fingers.

"How about you Sonny?"

"No, I haven't seen him about either, Richard."

"Strange for him to miss two sessions in a row," Richard said, settling into his own seat. "Anyway, enough about absent friends for now. I'm sure he's fine. Let's get on shall we while we've got the hall? Welcome one and all to the Formerly Infected Humans Support Group. I notice we've got one new face with us tonight. Would you mind telling us your name dear?"

Across the circle, the mousy woman startled. "Who...Me? Oh. Mandy. My name's Mandy." The whole group in turn offered up a rumbling greeting to her, most on autopilot.

"It's wonderful to have you here with us tonight, Mandy. I'm sure it was very difficult to take this first step to join us. Rest assured, you are amongst friends here. Everyone present,

including myself, was previously affected by the virus. We're all recovering, like you and rebuilding our lives one step at a time. Now, do you feel like you could tell us a little of your story maybe and let us know why you have decided to join us?"

Mandy looked a little stunned. She faltered, "Well..."

"You can do it, Mandy. We're all with you," Tracy put in. The rest offered their support in turn.

"Well," Mandy began. "It's not anything special. I suppose I'm a lot like the rest of you really. Life was hard but uneventful until a few years ago. Until people started getting sick from the virus. Turning. What we were seeing on the TV. What we saw in London. It was so terrifying. Then it came here and before I knew it, I had it. It overtook me. I could feel my humanity slipping away so quickly. I got so sick. Then the unbearable aching came. The hunger..."

Mandy broke down into sniffling tears. The lady sat beside her rested an arm across her shoulder in support.

"Are you ok to go on, Mandy?" Richard asked.

"Yes. Sorry. Yes, I think so. After that, well it was all a blur. Shambling about from place to place, all hollowed out. Following the pack. Looking for...well, you all know don't you? Meals. Always hungry. Unable to resist that urge. For me, it was almost like being locked in. I felt like I could see what was happening, see how grotesque it all was. The gore. Oh, dear lord the gore! But I couldn't do anything about it. Like I was in the back seat in my own mind. I wasn't driving. Something else was. Something evil and desperate."

“That’s right,” Sonny said. “People are quick to forget, we were victims in all this too. Go on Mandy.”

“Well, then the cure came and after a while, I recovered. I sort of got back into control and all of a sudden, I’m in this kind of field hospital. So weak. It took me a while to get back on my feet again. My leg. Something must have happened to it while I was turned as it’s never been right again. They took my details and registered me. Once I was well enough to leave, I wondered what to do. I mean what do you do after that? Eventually, I just wandered home. I dreaded what I’d find there. Thankfully, the family was ok. They’d holed up and managed to stay safe. Don, my husband, he’s good with stuff like that. Very practical. That was about six months ago now.”

“Sounds as though you’ve been through hell Mandy, but it’s a mercy that you’re back with your family at least,” Richard said. “So, what brings you here tonight to sit with us old zombies then?” That brought a little shocked chuckle from most of them.

“Well, it’s me and Don,” Mandy went on. “We’ve tried. He’s tried. But things just aren’t the same as they were before. He spotted it you see, back then in the first place. He saw I was getting sick. He’d heard the early warning signs to watch out for on the radio. He threw me out before I turned. I don’t blame him. He had to do it...for the kids. Now I’m back though, it’s awkward. We’re trying, but it’s difficult. I feel like he’s always watching me. Suspicious. Like he doesn’t believe I’m well again. He says terrible things about us. You know, people who turned. Like they should have just burned us all to be on the safe side. Then he remembers. Says sorry. He still won’t let me be alone with the children.”

“Oh, love. That’s terrible,” Tracy said.

“It’s not his fault really. He’s been through so much too. Things seem to just be getting worse though. I was making dinner this evening and he caught me behind the fridge door, sniffing at the steak. He said if he hadn’t caught me, I’d have eaten it raw. That I had a funny look in my eyes. Like there was still something not right. I wasn’t going to, I swear! Well after that, I just had to get out of the house for a bit, for some space. Then I remembered I’d seen a poster for this group.”

“Don’t worry, Mandy,” Richard said. “You’ve done the right thing, coming here. It will help to talk about it. We’re all going through the same challenges. Reconciling with family can be really difficult after the cure, especially when they were on the other side of the divide. Some people find talking openly as a family can help. Sharing your different experiences. That can help us understand the trauma we’ve all had to suffer, in very different ways, these last three or four years. Give it time and I’m sure you can work it out. Time will show Don that he has nothing to fear from you anymore.”

“That’s right,” Tracy said. “And if he doesn’t get his head out of his arse, you need to chuck him out.”

Again, the wood-panelled amber room rang with a little laughter. As it subsided, Richard moved things along. “And how about you Peter? How have things been with you this week?”

Around the curve, Peter shuffled in his seat. His nerves looked shot and his complexion resembled greying meat. “Oh, I don’t know, Richard. I felt like things were picking up, but now I feel like I’m right back where I was before. I can’t take much more.”

“You seemed a little more positive last week, what happened?”

“Well, you all remember that fella I told you about who moved in next door, right?”

The rest of the crowd murmured in agreement.

“Well, this fella. Nigel his name is. We got talking and he asked if I fancied going down the pub for a few. I thought, what the hell, why not? Live a little. So, he gets a babysitter for his kids and we go down the pub. We have a few, watching the football. It’s back on now, isn’t it? Then once it was kicking out time, we go round his. He says he’s got some nice Whiskey. While I’m there though, I notice this photo of his dead wife and I swear to God, it strikes me right then and there. I knew her face. I could remember her screams. It was me who did her in. Me and the rest. I can remember clawing at her head, rubbing my fingers raw to get in at her brains. I...I...”

Peter descended into tears. Richard stepped in. “Now, now, come on Peter. You’ve been doing so well. Let’s try and look at the positives. A night out with a new friend is a good thing. A real step in the right direction. You’re not alone. We all get this from time to time. These specific, false memories. It’s the guilt. We know what we’ve all done, but it wasn’t our fault. You can’t allow the guilt to eat you up. It wasn’t you. You weren’t in control, were you? Say it for us now.”

Peter stopped snivelling and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “It wasn’t me. I wasn’t in control.” The whole room agreed with him. Reassured him. “It all seems so damn real though. The memories. I can see it. The violence, The savagery. The screams. So much blood.”

“Yes,” Richard said, looking Peter dead in the eyes. “All of that was real. We were all there. We all did those terrible things too. But we couldn’t do any more to stop it than those poor people could.”

“It’d be bloody helpful if someone reminded the rest of them of that Rich,” Sonny put in. “Way I see it, the rest of them, the ones who didn’t turn, they’re strutting around now like they won some bloody war or something. A war we lost. They want to punish us for what we did. They blame us for it all. The economy being on its arse. Everything being in such a mess. That lot down in Westminster just egg them on too. They treat us like second class citizens now. Vermin.”

“Well, I think you’re right in some instances, Sonny. But not everyone’s like that,” Richard said.

“Must just be the ones I run into then Rich. Take this job I had. Oh, it’s fine at first. You get your foot in the door. Do a good job, or as good a job as our knackered bodies will let us do now. Then the whispering starts. Then before you know it, you’re having a difficult conversation with the boss and you’re out on your arse. Yeah, they find some pretence. Bad trade. Poor performance. But you know what they really mean. It’s that bloody list if you ask me. The register. They might say it’s to show we’re all squeaky clean and cured, but it puts the mark on you. They may as well brand us all. No one is going to let any of us forget what we were. What that virus turned us into. Is it too much to ask to get paid an honest wage for a hard day’s graft?”

“No, Sonny. It isn’t,” Richard said. “And if that sort of thing is going on, that’s discrimination. Our past, what happened to us, well it’s a protected characteristic now. You could sue them for that, if that’s what’s going on. I’ve got some leaflets somewhere...”

“Yeah well, I miss it and I don’t care who hears.”

Everyone turned to look at old Len.

“Now Len, we’ve spoken about this before,” Richard said. “You can’t go around saying things like that. You’ll upset people. A lot of people died.”

“A lot of people always die. I’m 87. I’ll say what I want. I miss it. It’s true. Sure enough, it was bloody horrible stuff, but at least I wasn’t alone. I had someone. I had company at least. I can remember feeling part of something. Now what? Other than coming here I don’t see anybody all week. At least we looked after our own, when we were zombies. Everyone got their share. We stuck together. Where’s the community now? Nowhere!”

“I know it must be difficult for you, Len. Maybe we can look at getting you a bit of help at home? I could pop in too, through the week maybe?” Richard said. Len grumbled his response. Non-committal.

“Anyway folks, that’s the quickest half hour of the week done and dusted,” Richard said. “I wish we had time to hear from everyone, but the choir will be needing the hall for practice any minute. It’s been lovely to catch up on how you’re all doing. I do hope this has helped and hopefully, I’ll see you all again next week. Bring anyone else along with you too. The more the merrier and remember, if you need to talk, you’ve all got my number.”

With that the chairs began to scrape as they all got to their feet, splintering into smaller crowds, conversing on their way out. Once everyone was gone, the choir made their way in. Richard waved at the choirmaster on his way out. The choirmaster did not reciprocate. He obviously didn’t see Richard as a peer. The rest of the choir busied themselves, sanitising

the seats. They didn't even have the decency to wait until Richard left. What a world they were left with now. Overflowing with suspicion.

Taking the bus home, Richard pretended not to see the children behind him, goofing around and doing lumbering zombie poses. He pretended not to hear them groaning. The laughing. How quickly society forgot its terror and carried on regardless. They were all a joke now. A dog to be kicked. A scapegoat for all society's current ills, of which there were many.

By the time he reached his modest flat, Richard was glad to be back home. Glad and hungry. He went to the fridge and took out the plate of leftovers that still had what remained of Jonathan's severed head left on it. There was still a fair bit of the brain left. Thinking that he'd done a pretty good job of covering his tracks by asking about his victim's whereabouts at the group, he hummed as he carved a few thin slices of grey matter onto a plate. From there he made a quick sandwich. Lovely. Nostalgic even.

The rest of society thought that the appetite had left them. That the formerly infected were harmless enough now. More arrogance. He'd heard rumours to the contrary and he was certain he wasn't alone in harbouring the hunger still. Maybe there was something dormant in them all, ready to rise again in time. A virus not dead, just resting. Or maybe some of them just enjoyed the killing. The killing and the eating. He definitely did. Either way, the war wasn't over yet.