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Symptoms of the Virus

by **Emily Haase**

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SYMPTOMS OF THE VIRUS BY DR. HENRY ESQUIRE III MD CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

1. Severe hunger, often voicing their distress.
2. Chronic moodiness, confusion, sullenness.
3. Irritability, otherwise emotionally unstable. Paranoia.
4. Homicidal tendencies – full takeover of the disease. Handle with caution.

I was pondering whether scratching five (zombification?) or perhaps a two-and-a-half (insomnia, only affecting a portion of those affected?) into the dirt was necessary before Travis made my decision. He didn't mean to do it, of course, but he stomped across the list anyway, destroying it. He didn't even stop to say sorry, so he must not even have noticed.

Abigail, the red-headed woman who had picked me and Travis up, did. She looked at me with sympathy and put a hand on my back. Twofold purpose – asking me to keep moving, and providing comfort. Efficient. I liked Abigail.

“What were you doing, Henry?” she asked kindly as we walked, and I dropped the stick I'd been drawing with. Travis was up a little way further arguing with Abigail's husband – Benjy to her, Benjamin to me, and Ben to everyone else.

“Making a list of symptoms of the zombification virus. Like, Stage 1, Stage 2, Stage 3 ... except I don't know what to say about how it's spread, which is probably what's most important. Through the air, d'you think?”

Abigail let out a laugh, and shook her head. Don't know why; it was too serious a situation for that. “No, no, probably not through the air. Otherwise we'd all be infected, wouldn't we?”

“Water, then?”

“Maybe rats.”

We bickered amicably a little while longer, although her assumptions grew more and more ridiculous as time went on. No wonder about that. We were all hungry, and tired. It'd been a long day.

Nobody thought of it like I did, but I knew what was what, you know. Before the virus outbreak, I'd been into zombie things, and they all started like this – with people too concerned for their survival to really worry about investigating the virus. But we have to figure things out in order to know what they are, and then we know how to treat them, right?

When the world had collapsed into chaos, nobody knew about the virus, at first. It was silly. How could they not know? What else would

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explain those half-human things walking around? People were blind, even in the apocalypse, I decided.

But, I found Abigail and Benjamin, and then we had picked up Travis just a few weeks ago. Travis liked to wear overalls, exclusively, and he looked a little bit like someone had just stuffed a bunch of straw into them and decided that was good enough to make a man.

“Up here,” Benjamin, who liked to use as few words as possible, called out. A building was up ahead, dilapidated and falling apart, but with roof and therefore with security. “For the night.”

“Thank God,” the overall-man answered, trudging alongside Benjamin. As if agreeing with his religion and his words, my stomach rumbled in agreement with him. Hopefully Abigail had food. She’d been put in charge of such things, not because she was a woman, but because she’d been a chef before everything had started. “If we were going to walk much longer, I was going to just have Henry carry me. Whaddaya say, champ? Nah, I’d probably crush you, kiddo.”

Of course, it might’ve been ‘chump’. Travis mumbled constantly.

“Maybe we’ll find some paper for you, huh? So you could write the symptoms for the virus down,” Abigail told me, giving a conspiratorial wink. Benjamin slowed so he could walk with an arm around her, and Travis gagged a little in disgust. He was generally grumpy, but he was good at a few things, probably.

Setting up for the night wasn’t difficult. Although my primary focus was on identifying (and somehow ending) the disease, one had to be focused with day-to-day life. Food. Water. Maslow’s Pyramid, from the base up.

We each had our own little cots, making a small ‘Y’ in front of the fire – Abigail and Benjamin in one cot, me in one, Travis tossing and turning in another.

We had eaten a small lunch (dinner?) of canned beans, which Travis spent most of his time complaining about how he didn’t like them even before the world had gone to shit (mumble). Paired with a bit of purified water, though, and it was enough to stop all of our stomachs from grumbling for the night.

TREATMENT 1 – ADEQUATE FOOD SUPPLY SLOWS/COMPLETELY STOPS THE SPREAD OF THE VIRUS. STARVATION ACCELERATES.

With lack of paper, I was forced to keep all of my notes on the virus in my head. It wasn’t really very difficult, because of how little we knew. Past symptom four, people ... left. Ran off into the night. Or we had to kill them. Not we, personally – the thought of Abigail with a bloody axe was morbidly amusing, in a ‘murderous chef’ sort of way. But we’d heard stories on the road.

Abigail and Benjamin had disappeared to plan where we were going. We weren’t so idiotic to think that there was some utopia, some place where everything would be magically okay. But there were definitely

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places, out there, that were a little bit better than others. Abigail was pretty good at finding out where they were. Or at least, she'd been good so far.

Nobody had really talked during dinner, but Travis had been remarkably silent. He was sitting on his cot, fiddling with something in his hands. A Rubik's Cube?

"Where'd you get that?" I asked curiously, sitting cross-legged on my cot. They'd found no paper, but a glossary of medical terms. Perhaps I could get a bit more specific. The book was sitting in my lap, opened to a random page in the F's.

Travis just let out an unintelligible mumble and hid the toy underneath his cot, although the square outline was still clearly visible. So much for that conversation.

"We'll be heading East," Abigail announced, and Benjamin echoed the last word with her. They were both holding the map in their hands, showing to Travis and I a few black lines that would indicate our movements. "We've been thinking rural towns, and - well, Benjy and I went on a vacation here, and it's really quite small. Doubt they were hit as hard."

"But what if we meet people infected with the virus on the way? Aren't they going to be out on the roads?" At first, Abigail's eyes snapped to me as if she thought I had said the words, but they had come out, instead, from Travis' mouth. For a second, I was filled with pride - finally, god, someone was taking this virus seriously.

Abigail and Benjamin exchanged a look before nodding to one another. "No, no, we ... it should be fine. But it is going to be a long, and - ahem, dangerous walk tomorrow, so we should really get our sleep. Henry, you wake up before all of us, so make sure Travis doesn't oversleep again."

"I don't oversleep!" Travis protested with a little more force than what was truly necessary.

Another exchanged look from the lovebirds. Travis scowled on his cot, his denim overalls wrinkling a little in the front, before he curled up sideways. One bony hand darted forward for the Rubik's Cube, click-clacking as he curled up on his side.

It was an impromptu way to end the night, but none of us needed very much convincing to sleep.

TREATMENT 2 - SOCIAL INTERACTION SLOWS THE SPREAD OF THE VIRUS

Even if these people were strange, and weird. Surely it helped. We all looked out for one another. Travis had been a mechanic. One time, we'd found a working car and Travis had been the guy to get it working. That had been the happiest I'd ever seen him, really. Even Benjamin had cracked a smile at it with him.

I fell asleep quickly, brought on more by exhaustion than lack of

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things to think.

And just as quickly, I woke. Some time had evidently passed, but all I could really hear (and what was probably the reason for me waking up) was the furious click-clack-click-clack of the Rubik's Cube.

And later, Benjamin and Abigail's voices whisper-arguing in the next room.

"Gone on long enough, Gail, we have to tell him, this isn't any sort of game to Henry anymore."

Click-clack-click-clack-click.

"Ben, it's just that - well, God, it's like Santa Claus, isn't it, it gives him some sort of closure, some sort of explanation - "

Click-clack-click-clack-click.

"Abigail, Travis is buying into it, now. Travis. We can't keep on ... this is ridiculous! And it could turn dangerous."

Pause.

"Dangerous how? Let the ten year old believe that there's some sort of zombie virus around - what could it possibly do to him? Besides, do you want to explain to Henry that there was an economic collapse- "

"What, that sometimes people are just terrible?"

"That's one word for them, Benjy."

"Tell him. And tell Travis, for that matter. He's an adult; we can't have him compromised the way he is."

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

There was a sharp intake of breath, as if Abigail wanted to say something. But before she could, there was a sudden, loud absence of noise from Travis - he'd stopped playing with the Rubik's Cube. It'd fallen from his hands.

I suppose the news should really have been more of a shock to me, but I had heard it groggily. I wasn't even entirely sure it wasn't a dream. It was certainly the most I'd ever heard Benjamin speak, which didn't look very good for the reality category.

Treatment 3 - A PROPER AMOUNT OF SLEEP SLOWS ...

I was out before I could form the end of the statement.

The 2nd time I woke up, the light was streaming in through the window. I was used to being the first to wake up, and so took my sweet time about it. I glanced around to the others - there was Benjamin and Abigail, holding one another (how sweet), and Travis --

Or, rather, Travis' cot.

Travis never got up early. What had happened? I stood and tried to listen. The morning was quiet, which I generally enjoyed. During the road trips, we thought that silence was a bad thing - silence left people alone to their thoughts, and nobody wanted that. You heard stories on the road about people being left to their thoughts for too long. Like the virus.

"Travis?" I called out hesitantly, pulling on a shirt and crossing the floor. It creaked in the worst way. Where had Travis gone? Usually it was

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such an effort getting him to do anything.

Maybe in the next room? I crossed the threshold, letting my fingers trace over the gray, rotted wood. As soon as my left foot went over the threshold, a hand snatched me backward.

And, a half a second after, a knife.

Understandably, I yelped a little in fear. It came out several notes higher than I thought I could possibly go.

“T-Travis!?” I stuttered into his ear, struggling against him. I was fairly certain that I got some sort of cut from the sharp buttons on his overalls, but I could hardly feel the pain. Where had he gotten that knife?

Abigail and Benjamin stuttered awake in a hurry, both scrambling out from their cot and rushing over. At that moment, Travis had taken the kindness to make me stumble a few inches forward into the room where we’d been sleeping. Frankly, it was a wonder that my knees even worked. Travis certainly wasn’t taking any liberties, moving forward. The rough texture of the knife handle brushed against my neck for a second.

It was when I saw the fear in their eyes – the abject, horrified fear – that I understood.

Obvious. Certain. Clear.

Travis was infected by the virus.

Obvious Stage Four, although it had gone a bit more than just a homicidal urge, at that point. It struck me that I was in definite danger of the virus spreading – after all, maybe it spread through skin-to-skin contact. Maybe it spread through breath. Whatever, I had to get out now.

I struggled against the knife, but Travis had always been strong. He adjusted his grip around the handle and held it tighter. I couldn’t get in a full breath.

“Travis,” Abigail started, putting out a hand as if I could take it. “What is this all for? Come on, let Henry go, he’s not done anything. He’s just a boy, just ...” Her voice was light, thin. “He’s not done anything.”

Travis’ voice barked. “I’ll infect him, Abigail, I swear I will! We can’t keep going on like this – we have to go west! West!”

“Why west?” Benjamin, now, his voice low. But he also had a hand outstretched towards me, and his hand was shaking more than Abigail’s. A clear sheen of sweat coated his face.

“Don’t you know? West is where everything ends. We have to end this. End the virus. End everything.”

“There is no virus! God, Travis, you know there’s no virus. There was never a virus; there was just ... people. You’re absolutely insane,” Abigail took a step forward, and the knife dug into my throat a bit. Before my mind stopped, I was vaguely aware of Benjamin running out of the room.

I didn’t feel it, but there must’ve been blood. I hadn’t been wearing a red shirt.

There was no virus. I was awake.

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Oh.

Everything seemed to move very slow, after that. It felt like my entire world just inched along. I felt stupid, at first. I'd been acting like a kid. No virus. Of course there wasn't. I'd just been watching too many movies. Mimesis. Referent. Benjamin ran out of the room, and I hardly noticed. How long had they been humoring me? Travis let out a growl – that I heard – and he said words – that, I didn't. Everything I'd been working on. Nothing serious, but ... all the files that I kept in my head. Useless. Stupid.

“Benjy, there's no call for that –“ Abigail started out, and I turned to see Benjamin.

The man had run in with something small and black in his hand. It was shiny and worn. I'd seen Benjamin take it out of his bag before, and polish it. Abigail would say that they weren't hunters, or monsters, and there was no call to get that out and scare the poor thing. Benjamin would say that emergencies called for emergencies, but put it away with an apologetic look and grasp of his wife's hand.

Was it an emergency, now? There were certainly alarm bells going off in my head. I felt dizzy.

It was the gunshot that restarted my heart. I blinked wildly at Abigail and Benjamin, and suddenly I was breathing again. Travis had jerked backward and stopped grabbing me, hitting his back up against the wall. His wide, gray eyes darted in between us. Slowly, he started to slide down, incredibly unwillingly – and then all at once, hitting the floor face-down with a thud. Something splintered, a floor below. A few red paint chips fell from the ceiling and, delicately, settled in Travis' hair.

The blue overalls didn't stain purple. Huh.

That was all I could think for a few seconds, before turning around to the others. Benjamin had stowed his gun back against his hip, and Abigail ran to run a thumb over my neck. “No, no, it's not bad – are you okay, Henry, honey?”

“I – uh, yeah. I'm fine. It's – yeah, it's fine.” I stuttered out, shaking my head.

“Got to go. It's –“

“For God's sake, Benjy, won't you just give us a second to – “

“No. No, it's fine. I'm fine, I can go.” I reached down for my bag and threw it over my shoulder, looking at Travis' unused cot. The Rubik's Cube was on the edge of it. Uneasily, I looked up at the others – should we? Is that what –

“We might need it.” Benjamin stated, going over and starting to roll Travis' cot up. He seemed sadder than usual, moving slower. There was also a barely-concealed frustration in his movements. Not guilt – maybe not yet. But frustration, maybe. Abigail put a hand on his back.

No virus. I brushed my shirt off. I wouldn't be wasting paper then. I adjusted the bag around my shoulders and glanced out the window –

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most of the buildings were still standing; the apocalypse hadn't been that long ago. But there was an eerie, supernatural sense of quiet about everything that was fit to drive me crazy already. Rural was best, indeed.

I had to think about things.

"Yeah," I said off-handedly, turning back. "We might."