

Flavivirus

If it hadn't been for the forecast on the television, one could be forgiven for not believing that the hurricane was over after all.

Gary Lightman, an aging former engineer who'd retired over a decade ago to Gold State, doesn't miss this kind of rain. Most of the family had left years ago, scattering across the country, when the warming of the world had sunk its teeth into Violet City and leveled homes, schools, and all the infrastructure in between with three violent hurricanes in as many years. His son, though- his son had stayed. Built a family there. And now, the city's been leveled again, and Gary's here to pick up the pieces.

The wind howls and rattles his car, an old minivan that's stood the test of time (and the whims and wishes of a half-dozen grandchildren) and an untold number of storms before this one. Rain patters the roof and windshields so heavily that it flows off of the car like sheets of icing, nearly impossible to see through. The car in front of Gary swerves, having nearly missed a soaking-wet deer in the mix of early morning night and close to impenetrable rain, sending a cascade of water over Gary's windshield. He screeches to a halt, probably drenching the car behind him, too.

Bit by bit, inch by inch, as they make their way slowly up and across an overpass, the rain begins to lessen. As Gary begins his ascent, he can barely see ten feet ahead of him between the raindrops. By the time he pulls off of the bridge, he can see nearly half a mile.

Not as good as full clarity, of course, but something is certainly better than nothing.

It's fortunate, Gary thinks, that these highways are built up so high. He's off the overpass, but it's still much higher than the lower, everyday streets in Violet. The flooding has receded, some, (although the rain hasn't let up, it's certainly less than it was last week, when Gary set out from his retirement community in Gold), but most of the residential areas are still covered in a thick layer of muddy, swirling water.

As the traffic inches along, the drizzle fades. The clouds, once heavy and dark, open up into a bright, clear sky. Despite the humidity weighing everything down, it still manages to be a sunny, beautiful blue that wouldn't look out of place on a tropical beach- if the tropical beaches this year hadn't already been pummeled by their own tropical storms (and an odd freeze, months earlier, and a nasty strain of influenza in the past October).

With the sun, though, comes the sweltering Indigo State heat. With the heat comes the *smell*.

The stench of rotting food- bread, meat, and vegetables left behind to soak up water and spoil- is pervasive, invading every corner of Gary's nose. He grits his teeth, and takes his exit towards the shelter.

The smell of rotted food is replaced by an overwhelming sound of *buzzing*. Deep puddles stretch across the parking lot, covered in quickly moving clouds that Gary does not, in as few words, remember

fondly from his childhood here. His son, Carl, waves, and Gary pulls up, flush against the curb, silently beginning to load bags into the back of the van.

He doesn't say anything. There really aren't any words that describe what his family is going through, right now. It's the right decision, leaving, no matter how difficult it may be, but that doesn't change the fact that it *is* difficult. They've all seen the forecasts- while it doesn't look like they're due for another hurricane anytime soon, there's a wicked-looking tropical storm whipping itself up into a frenzy in the Cerulean right now.

They can't stay here. Their flooded home is a tragedy, but it acts as the punctuation mark on that sentence just as much.

There's an upset yowl from the bag that his granddaughter has slung over her shoulder. The family cat, of course. The tiny creature is a menace, but Gary is glad to see it's made it out of the flooding as safely as the rest of the family. He's got something to be thankful for, at least. Gary doesn't care about the material losses. Every member of his family has made it out *alive*.

Across the parking lot, a woman collapses, still scratching at the red, splotchy rash along her arms. Carl races across the parking lot in an instant, reaching a hand out to help her up.

There's some fuss about calling an ambulance, but eventually the woman's daughter shows her face, offering to drive her to the hospital. Gary knows, deep in his bones, that it won't be of much help- from years of living in Violet before he moved, he remembers how stuffed-up it gets during hurricanes, especially when there's risks of outbreaks. Coronavirus, influenza, sometimes other acute respiratory infections make the clogging of the hospitals particularly bad, and he'd heard there'd been a nasty coronavirus outbreak a few weeks before the storm hit. Teal is a big country, over three hundred million people (with 18.4% of those under fourteen years old, and another 16.6% above sixty-five), and a wealthy one to boot, but despite its shiny appearance, Gary knows from experience in dealing with its medical system that, like the overpass that's so deeply cracked-and-patched that it'll probably crumple within the decade, the infrastructure cannot match demand in a crisis.

He remembers reading, back during that pandemic years ago, that there had been less than three hospital beds for every thousand people in the country, and less than half that for pediatric hospital beds. Gary finds himself wondering, as the daughter peels out of the parking lot in a cloud of dark smoke and the acrid stench of rubber, how long they're going to have to sit in the waiting room, practically begging to be seen, if they can even afford what it'll cost them.

He turns back to packing the minivan.

"Thank you," says Laura, his daughter-in-law, reaching down with him to lift up a particularly stubborn suitcase. From the label it holds, it's probably filled with a mix of important mementos and documentation. Laura has always been a quick packer, and Gary would rather they be uncomfortable on the drive home from an overstuffed trunk than the alternative.

“For coming all this way,” she clarifies, “I know you didn’t have to do that.”

“You’re wrong about that,” Gary replies, “You’re family. I would’ve come regardless.”

There’s a buzzing near his ear. He slaps at it, and his hand comes back red.

“Damn mosquitoes,” he grumbles, “You know, back in *my* day, we used to spray DDT every night, to make sure we got ‘em all. Wish we’d’ve found a followup to that one that *doesn’t* involve wreckin’ the birds.”

Laura nods. Her eyes are unfocused, glassy. They stay that way for the remainder of the three-day drive back to Gold. Carl can keep his eyes on the road a hell of a lot longer than Gary ever could.

The deep-set ache in Gary’s bones, written off as just a side effect of sitting in the same chair for twenty-two hours spread out over three days, or perhaps a result of the stress he’s kept locked in his muscles since the forecast made its way across the radio weeks ago, doesn’t go away now that he’s home, now that his son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter are holed up in the nice guest rooms that haven’t been used since his wife passed.

Instead, just as the fourth day dawns, it’s gotten worse. The pain is hot, fierce, and confined primarily to his back. Gary’s no stranger to chronic pain, however. It’s uncomfortable, to say the least- if he were to complain about it out loud, he’d say that it hurts like the *dickens*- but it’s bearable.

And... they’ve spent so long, unsafe and uncomfortable and upset. Who is he to disturb their newly found peace for a minor backache, some stomach problems, and a low-grade fever?

Instead, Gary suffers in silence, quietly passing the time petting his granddaughter’s menace of a cat, who has decided that every wire in the house is hers to chew upon (but enjoys spending time in Gary’s lap, purring louder than the engines Gary used to work on as his most treasured of hobbies), and swatting at the mosquitoes that seem to enjoy taunting him from their alcoves in his potted plants. The fever, though, is a little harder to hide than any of his general aches or pains. It rises to his face without any remorse. Gary feels as if he’s walking through warmed butter all the time- his mind moves slowly, and he’s far too hot.

“You look a little flushed,” Carl hums, eyes narrowed in concern, “You sure you’re alright, Dad?”

“Eh, I’m old,” Gary grumbles in response, “Lot of stuff makes me just a little bit sick. I feel fine. Chances are it’ll probably be better by Friday.”

That, surprisingly enough, ends up being correct. Only four days after the onset of his backache, he wakes up feeling more refreshed than ever. His son, laptop in hand, frowns.

“Are you sure you don’t want to head to the hospital, Dad? Your fever was getting pretty bad.”

“I’m *fine*,” Gary grumbles once again, “Now, you able to work on that thingamagig?”

Carl snorts, a fond smile crossing his face.

“Yeah, Dad, I can work from home. You sure you don’t need help? I promise, it’s no trouble.”

“If I’d forgotten how to make a dang omelet, I’d be sure to let y’all know,” Gary huffs, flipping over the eggs in the skillet. The pain of the last few days has left him miserable and irritable, to say the least. It’s difficult to be kind, when you’re tired and hurting.

“Okay, okay,” Carl says, raising his hands in a ‘peace’ gesture. That is the last anyone talks about *that*.

... Of course, that is, until Saturday afternoon, a day and change after he’d begun to feel better, when Gary rushes to the bathroom to upend his entire stomach, which immediately sinks back down to where it had been before, and even further down, like a bowling ball has been placed firmly within his gut, when he sees what’s in the toilet in front of him.

Now, some men might be more curious about vomit the color of coffee grounds, wondering what they’d eaten to cause that color in the toilet bowl.

Not Gary.

He has more good sense than that.

“Carl! Laura!” he calls, banging the bathroom door open, “I need one of y’all to drive me to the hospital!”

Gary Lightman knows the dark, ugly sight of blood in his vomit when he sees it.

Emergency room waits in Gold, fortunately, are much shorter than they would’ve been back in Violet, or in any part of Indigo, honestly. Despite the recent warming of the planet, Gold hasn’t dealt with any massive flooding or hurricane-strength winds- there *has* been a few odd freezes in recent years, but nothing as serious as what the landlocked middle of Teal and the warm coastal regions like Indigo are facing. Most of the various ailments are unrelated to any greater issue, which means that Gary, who’s puking blood and scratching at a fresh rash that crawls its way up his hands and down onto his torso, is seen very quickly.

That’s the last good news the Lightman family will be hearing for a while.

Gary- kind, quick-to-worry, occasionally-grumpy Gary- is swept away into an innocuous looking hospital room, thick curtains protecting his privacy as he tosses and turns each and every which way. The rest of the Lightman family is told to wait some distance away, to give everyone else space. The hallway, formerly as quiet as a hallway in a low-traffic hospital in a wealthy suburban neighborhood can be, turns

into a flurry of blue scrubs and white coats. Carl, Laura, and their daughter Emily cling to each other, watching the door with concern.

They wait. For hours and hours, they wait in the sterile, quiet hallways, not knowing what lies in wait for them.

Meanwhile, in a small, innocuous-looking white room, only a few doors down from Gary Lightman, a few nervous-looking doctors, pulled from less busy areas around an incredibly, oddly, *ominously* quiet hospital, gather around a table, not wanting to be within earshot of members of the Lightman family.

“It’s definitely a flavivirus of some kind,” an older woman hums, “Honestly, considering the nature of the rash, I would’ve said dengue, but we ran a rapid NAAT test and it came back negative. Not yellow fever, either, despite the internal bleeding and the color of the urine.”

“Patient was in Violet, Indigo before. If it’s a flavivirus, chances are that he probably picked it up while he was there. I’ve asked around. They’re overwhelmed to hell and back with all of the destruction from the hurricane, and for good reason. Half the staff in most of the hospitals had to evacuate, and even more in some hospitals, depending on the city. We don’t have any official numbers yet, but as far as anyone can tell- yeah, they’ve had more than a few cases,” another doctor offers.

“Not a good combination,” the older woman hums under her breath, “Hurricanes and anything mosquito-borne, that is.”

“No, it isn’t,” the second doctor concurs.

In that moment, both of them come to an identical realization.

Perhaps, they realize, this particular virus has not just latched on to residents and elderly men. Perhaps it has burrowed (in a way, of course, as viruses cannot burrow) into those who have come to help, like Gary Lightman, from all across Teal. Perhaps it has even clung to people like that from other countries, who will go back to nations wetter, warmer, and more filled with mosquitoes than they’ve ever been before.

It’s too late to sound the first alarm, to keep people where they are, to keep them from offering themselves up to tiger-striped little vampires and vectors of disease.

It’s not too late to sound a second. Any time- six months, one month, a week, a day, even an hour- could save lives. At the very least, it could save one. Even the barest hint of a warning is better than nothing.

“We should confirm it’s a novel virus, first,” a third doctor offers. The first, the older woman, nods, rubbing away her cold, shaking hands.

In the emergency room, another elderly man with a curling, coiling rash, like flames licking up his hands, walks through the door, stumbling under the pain that pierces behind his eyes.