

A person with long hair, seen from behind, is walking away on a dirt path that leads into a dense forest. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The trees are tall and their leaves are vibrant green and yellow. The path is slightly curved and leads towards a bright, glowing opening in the trees.

THE OTHER SIDE OF PARADISE

BY: STEPHEN NOLLY

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I

What would you do for the person you loved? What would you do to get them back? What would you give up?

Anything in the world?

Or everything in the world...

That's what I did. That's what we did.

Every day is a gift, and I don't mean that in the saccharine way bottle caps from hippie ice teas say it.

Every day is a gift.

The water laps against the hull as our little motorboat struggles to climb the sea caps. The freighter won't go within five miles of the island, so we are left to fight the current that seems to drift away from the shore in all directions.

She holds onto the edge of the rail and leans over the side. I stop the engine and hold her hair back and wait for her to be OK.

After the moment has passed, we finally approach the shallows, and I hop out and drag the boat onto the beach.

I lost Rachel a year ago. A year ago, she died. And yet here she is.

Here *we* are. On the beach of our own private island.
They say if you want to make God laugh, make plans for the future.

This must have been a riot.

II

I was working for Big Pharmaceutical at the time. The name doesn't matter. Clinical work seemed to be the best way to pay off the mountain of student loan debt that Academia provides with letters after your name.

That, and I fell in love.

Working in clinics for no pay is great for the starving idealist.

But starving the woman you love because of your ideals became... less than noble.
So I started moonlighting - clinic work in a field that could really change things. It wasn't altruism or charity, but if a company wants to save millions of lives, you can't really hate them for wanting to make money off it.

And we did good work - great work. Grants started to pour in.

We were developing nanotechnology on a biological level - artificial cells.
We started with a virus as our base model. No indigenous DNA, only RNA and a host to create duplication.

But viruses have their limits. They mutate.
Controlled studies with genetically modified viruses have always ended bad in third-stage trials.

The goal was to repair damage at the cellular level using the body's own metabolic structure, allowing it to heal itself. But we couldn't control it.

Our grant was running out, and without a proof of concept, there would be no renewal.

Then disaster struck.

Wonderful, beautiful, disaster.
I got the call just as I walked into the lab.

Come home.

What? What's going on?

Come home. Now. You need to be here.

Is everything alright?

The doctor just called back. It's cancer. I have cancer.

III

They were pretty good about it at the lab, in hindsight. No one could duplicate the work that I was doing, but there was enough of a backlog of filing, that they let me leave when I needed to leave.

And of course, the grant eventually ran out, like they always do.

Meanwhile, I went to doctor visits, did research on this cancer. I learned everything I could about it. It became my world.

So the project, and my professional career, died.

Three months passed.

Treatment began that summer. It was a long, hot summer. Rachel's family was in town, and wanted to stay with her while she was admitted for treatment. The hospital room was packed, so the nurses "politely" asked for one of us to leave.

Take a break. We have this. We'll take good care of her.

And with as much of me that didn't want to go, there was a part of me that needed rest.

So I left.

IV

The void became overwhelming. Free time was a luxury I had not become accustomed to - so much that it became a burden.

I decided to go to the lab and pack up the office, an errand that was long overdue. Once I got to the lab, I noticed some lights on.

Who's there?

It's me. What are you doing here?

Sully? Oh my God, what are you doing here?

Packing up, what are you doing here?

Oh... umm... Listen, you shouldn't be here.

Whats going on?

The grant ran out.

I know.

You weren't around.

Yeah... sorry -

But we couldn't give up... we kept coming anyway.

What do you mean -

We just kept sneaking in and working on stuff, and we needed more money-

What are you getting at?

And there was a bid at DARPA.

Through DoD?

Yeah... and we... we pushed the data.

What do you mean "pushed"?

We kind of... fabricated some of the data - look, we were certain we were going to get there soon anyway. It's like post-dating a check.

And...

We haven't gotten there yet. Listen, we need you. You gotta help us. They want a working model, and we just can't get the replication to stay in check. It just is never the same strain.

I don't have time right now.

Just take a look.

I can't -

Just... just give me your opinion. Just look.

...Send it to my station.

I went through the simulation.

What are you guys doing? This is the same model Rochester was working on last year. Brent wanted to use this model.

I told Brent last year why this sim is unstable.

He felt you had a prejudiced view.

Why? Because my paradigm was better?

Yeah.

Well. Brent's an idiot... What is this?

The first generation works fine. We get a primary layer of perfect cells, then the reduplication mutates and we can never repeat the results. It just creates chaos.

Well that's the problem. You can't control the chaos.

Ok- we already knew that. Thanks. How do you control chaos?

I stared at the screen for a second. There is something about getting lost in your work that is like returning to an old lover. As much as you may forget, or change your memories of what it was

like, the first moment in the saddle is like a wormhole back to that point in time again, like not a second has passed.

Sully? Hey, Sully? You ok?

What? Yeah.

I stared at the screen. What is this?... Destruction. Chaos. How do you stop the chaos? How do you fight the chaos.

And then, an explosion went off in my head. Literally, an explosion. Some John Wayne movie about putting out fires using explosives. And in the end he dies from some work related accident that doesn't even involve fire.

Explosions. Chaos.
You fight chaos with chaos.

The virus is the wrong model.

What are you talking about? The virus the is the basis of everything we've been working on. This was your hypothesis.

No - I mean. What we need isn't a living, thriving virus, but something that feeds on the single stage of cellular duplication... A cancer

What?

A cancer for the virus. This will prevent the virus from reaching any secondary stages of duplication. Every layer will always be a first generation cell.

Basically... it never learns.

Thats how we keep it in check.

I alter the computer model for a preliminary simulation

Whoa. Whoa. What are you doing?

Just an idea.

You cant do that.

Why are we trying to repair -

Because thats what we -

Why not just... replace. Regrow.

What about cellular decay?

What about it?

Who do you -

This takes it out of the equation. We just... replace the cells.

V

An old biology teacher once said that we replace every cell of our body every seven years. An even older philosophy teacher posed a question to the class. If you replace on plank on a ship, is it still the same ship? What if you replaced each plank on the ship, one by one, it would still be that ship. And then what if you took all the old planks, and built a ship out of it. Which one would be the real ship? But of course, here you are, and you are still you, despite the mountain of discarded skin and dust and debris that may amount to what you used to be.

I spent the week in the lab. Rachel would be home at the end of the week, and this was exactly the distraction I needed.

The proposal went out to the team the next day. There were mixed feelings about my return to the project. They felt like I had abandoned them, and well, I had. But now I was back.

This was working. The simulations kept remaining stable... but now we were three months behind and DoD wanted a live proof-of-concept by the end of the month for what we were calling *Oncovir*. It was supposed to change the whole concept of field triage.

I returned home that week to attend to Rachel... Rachel. Not any distraction in the worked could take me from her.

The team continued with the paperwork, and I would slip out to the lab in the middle of the night, after Rae was down.

I needed 36 hours for every 24. Sleep became nonexistent.

We still needed proof of concept.

I was expecting a call from the lab, but instead it was from the hospital.

We have to stop treatment.

Silence.

What, why? Is it not responding?

No, no, the opposite. it's working too well.

So what's the problem?

It also killing off the healthy cells. She just can't take it.

She can do it. She's strong. I can help her. She can make it through this.

No. you don't understand. It's not a matter of will... her blood counts are just too low. She's not regenerating fast enough.

Lets try just one more honey, can you do one more?

A pained look.

Please baby, just one more, please, hang in there. Just one more.

She physically can't do it.

No, she can, she's strong - Aren't you, baby? Look at me. I can't lose you. I can't lose you.

Then, the straw that breaks...

I can't... I can't.. I want it to stop. I just want it to stop... this is worse than the cancer. This is killing me. Please don't make me do it. I can't.

OK..... OK..... You don't have to. It's OK.

VI

So we stop.... and she gets better. Or rather, she *feels* better.

Those few months were fantastic. It was almost like she was coming back. It was like she was actually healing herself.

But I was fooling myself - and I knew it. It wasn't long before the disease came back with a vengeance.

And again, I abandoned the project while they treaded water, fabricating data to buy more time. I didn't care. It just didn't seem important anymore.

Then, a light went out in my life.

Not like a candle blowing out, but a campfire, slowly dwindling, and even after the flame is gone, the burning embers smoldered, keeping heat and light in its amber glow, seeming to last forever, perhaps never to die out... until finally, they do.

The amount of paperwork involved when a person dies makes it a wonder how anyone ever does.

You have to make a decision on what to do with her biological material.

Biological material?

Her account is overdue, do you want to renew it?

What could be there? What was she storing? Stem cells? Cryogenically frozen embryos? My heart was pounding at the possibilities of preserving whatever I could.

At the hospital, they shoved forms in my face and made me go through various corridors and basements to get her actual samples.

I was handed a blue cooler I half expected to be filled with beer. I signed for it and went home, trying to contain myself. I locked the doors, turned on the lights in the kitchen and scrubbed up. The latch on the lid came off and I could feel my heart in my throat.

This was her... this was the last living bit of her.

And there it was... slides.

Tissue samples. vacu-tubes of blood samples.

And nothing else.

Heartbreak, too, happens one cell at a time. Each time, hoping, that once a cell dies, you might never feel it die again... but you do.

Like a pilot going through his checklist, I just went through the inventory of the cooler, checking each sample for integrity and repacked the cooler. I couldn't throw it away. I will. But I wasn't there yet.

So I took it to the lab that night for storage. Just to have her near me. The rest isn't hard to imagine.

VII

..There was an old lady that swallowed a fly... I don't know why she swallowed a fly

None of this was legal. None of it was sanctioned. But the results spoke for themselves. Laws didn't seem to matter.

It was a miracle case. The research lab has funded everything in order to document her as a test subject. They set me up with a portable laboratory off-shore to continue treatment.

I scan in test slides and have them analyzed over the SatCom. All I have to do is keep her alive. In real-world dollars, they would have paid a fortune. Only problem is: money doesn't do you too much good out here.

VII

The first days on the island take getting used to.

A crate the size of a small truck is airlifted to the beach. In it is everything we need to survive...

Survive is a terrible word.

Turning *survive* into live was what we had to do.

There was a prefab housing kit, and enough pulleys and rope to build anywhere. I became a one-man construction crew. A living room and bedroom, and portable lab and complete with autoclave and SatCom to send everything back to the mainland.

We found a large banyan tree overlooking the treetops with a view of the ocean on one side. It was high enough that we were protected from the jungle, and it would sway slightly on windy nights, rocking us both to sleep.

We had our own little ecosystem. Our own piece of heaven. Our own place to live.

IX

Some days are better than others. Days turn into weeks. She drifts away sometimes. It seems like she drifts away for longer and longer each time.

The treatment sessions are getting longer

But after - right after - the moments that I am with her - its worth everything.

Hi.

Hi.

It's good to have you back.

We enjoy the simple things. Dinner. Watching the monkeys play. Sometimes I wonder how much the monkeys are watching us play. Bathing her. Making love.

And then... I lose her.

She is getting thin... She's lost her appetite.

Do you still love me?

More than ever.

Do you think I'm beautiful?

The most beautiful creature on Earth.

And she is. She truly is.

I send the lab results off.

“Diminished returns,” they said. *“Finite loop.”*

So I concentrate the mixture, distilling it. There must be an answer.
I see her less and less. I delve into the lab more and more.

Mornings are the treatment times. Mornings are the worst.
She... forgets herself. She forgets me.

It's ok. Once she gets her treatment, she comes back to me, and I could spend the day with her...
or at least until the afternoon. She gets tired and I put her to bed, and then go off into the forest to
gather the herb necessary for my work.

We get a supply drop off every three months.
Our supply man tells me to call him Pablo, and every three months, he comes over from one of
the other islands in a jetty and gets makes more in one trip than he does the rest of the year.

His visits are brief. He's paid to look away, a job he doesn't excel at.

On this visit, he sees her.
She gets up out of her bed, nude.
It's hot out.

She walks across the hallway in the background.

Who's that?
It's nobody.

I knew this would not be the end of it.

Darkness falls.
That night he comes back to catch a peek at her sleeping.

I catch him and put a shotgun to his head. Next time, he wont get a warning.

X

She is deteriorating. She slips in and out.

Sometimes I don't know who I'm with... her... or her body... her still beating body, but she is... gone.

We make love.

Making love seems primal, yet still somehow, she no longer... there. The disease has compromised her endocrine system. Adrenaline seems make her more present. Heightened emotion: joy, ecstasy, fear, anger. But none of these last very long.

She has started to regress. Her reptilian brain is controlling her. At dinner, a bird flies in and lands on the table.

She looks at it, pick it up, then squeezes her hand around its neck and bites into it like an apple. I wrestle it away from her.

Her blood count is low.

If it gets too low, then the cancer which was supposed to be her savior will overrun her body and destroy her.

She needs a transfusion.

Communicating with the outside world starts to feel more like talking to different voices within my own head.

So I transfuse her with my blood. The slides seem to be getting better.

She has her strength again.
She is around and vital for longer and longer....

But not for too long.
The same process begins again.

The transfusion has set back the clock by a month, six weeks at the most... it would take me 12 weeks for me to regenerate the amount of blood from the last transfusion.

XI

A month goes by. She starts to go from nonexistent to violent in almost no time at all. Her rages have little to do with emotion and more to do with circumstance.

Then one night I wake up and she is gone. The ladder is down. I race into the night to find her.

Screams and screeches - a quarter mile away. I grab a torch and run.

I see her. Scraping it out. Surrounded by jackals. Scavenging over a half-rotting deer. She gnaws at the neck, and kicks away the dogs as they bite at her leg.

I scare off them off, pick her up, and take her back.

It's too early for her next treatment... fuck it.

I strap her down as she is spitting and hissing.

I inject into her picc-line: sedative, then the medication. She calms down immediately.... then starts crying...

You came for me.

She cries.

You found me.

Tears.

Save me. Promise you'll save me.

I promise.

Promise you'll always come for me. Promise you wont let me go. Promise me.

I promise.

She sleeps that night... as her... by my side, her head on my shoulder.

The next morning is rough. The next whole day is rough. She has to go without treatment today or she will become acclimated too fast. We have to get back on schedule.

XII

A noise.

Rachel, is that you?

Nothing.

I go back to my work.

Something has happened in her blood.

She seems to be having some of the same gains as she did with the transfusion.

What caused this?

The *Oncovir* cannot adapt. It is a static strain. So what's changed? Has her body learned to battle this on its own?

Then - I can smell it before I can feel it.

Sweat, manure and wet grass. Then cold steel against the back of my head.

Don't turn around.

Who is it?

You can't do that-

Pablo?

You can't keep her locked up here. You can't do that. Where is she?

You don't know what you're talking about.

Where is she? You can't keep her all to yourself. You don't deserve her. You act like she belongs to you.

She doesn't belong to me.

No... She belongs to me.

The hammer cocks - then I hear screams.

Rachel comes out of nowhere - gnawing on his neck, drinking hungrily at his blood.

I pull her off him. He is alive, but grabbing at his neck.

Leave. Leave now.

He won't make it through the night.

I clean her up and send her off to bed.

XIII

She comes about heartier than expected in the morning.

Then I see the lab results.

Her results are more and more regenerative.

I send the results back over the SatCom, and they want to know what been going on. This is some kind of breakthrough.

I don't tell them about the incident.

I redouble my efforts in the lab. Her return becomes remarkable.... just as remarkable as her regression. She seems to be regressing at twice the rate as before. The nights become longer. My lab hours do, too.

Then, an accident. A slide breaks and slices my hand. A drop of blood lands on a slide.

I have to throw it out for contamination, then I see it... the cells are absorbing platelets on a molecular level. The mitochondria is redirecting the platelets and absorbing them directly. She cannot create her own platelets, but she can absorb them on a cellular level. This is why she has been able to regenerate from the... accidents.

She needs blood.

Not transfusions, just blood cells.
XIV

A live-food diet began.

My love has returned to me

She is with me.

She is insatiable.

Our love making has never been more passionate.

Then one night

Sully?

Yes, dear?

How come you don't give to me anymore?

What do you mean?

I miss you.

I look at her.

I'm hungry.

I'll go get you some-

I miss YOU. Why don't you give to me? Don't you want to give to me? I need you. Don't go. I need you.

And with a look of need so deep in her eyes...

Ladies and gentlemen, I defy you to judge me. No man could say no. No man would have the heart.

I reach over to the night stand and pull out a hunting knife and hold it up to my wrist..

No... here.

She grabs the knife from me. Slowly she puts it up to me neck and hold it across the neck... my pulse is visible in my carotid...

Then, a quick nick.

I suck my teeth at the quick slice, then she lays in.
Not into my neck. Into my arms. I feed her. I sustain her. I am inside her.

The next morning, I wake up. It takes me a while to come to...
I take a slide of myself, and send it into the lab. Something's not right. The wound from the other night has almost healed. A little too quickly.

That night again:
Come to me. Do you love me? I need this.
Baby -
I need this.

And she feeds again.
The next morning I wake, weak. I can't keep doing this I have to say no.

But she is more alive than ever. We play and frolic and live on the earth. We go into the jungle and find a waterfall.
She is *living*.

XV

The feeding has to stop.
It *has* to.
So that night, I stop her. She goes into a rage.

How could you do this to me? You have nothing for me. Nothing to offer me. I am here sick, hungry, and you are concerned about yourself. I am dying, and you worry about how you feel?

She storms off into the dark. I give chase all night.

Nothing.

I search and search until dawn, then go back to the treehouse.

She is there at the top of the stairs, covered in blood.

Are you hurt?

She shakes her head.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.

It's alright.

She breaks down and cries.

You're going to leave me.

Never.

You're sick of me. Tired of all this.

Never.

Don't ever leave me.

Never.

XVI

She goes off into the night. I don't stop her.

I always go after her, and I always find her - in a field, crying, covered in blood.

I pick her up, put her over my shoulder, and take her home.

But this night was different. This night, the kill was different.

It was torn to shreds.

There's a moment when you have a lover - you want to know their mind and their heart. You know how they walk. You know how they kiss. You know how they make love... and you know how they kill.

Something here was off. Some if it was her - and yet... not.

XVII

This wasn't regression. This is different. Along with the return of her strength came mood swings. Violent mood swings out of no where. I started to log her changes in behavior. That's when I realized what was going on.

Withdrawal.

Sedating her destroyed whole point of the treatment to begin with. It would just make her disappear.

Dopamine. I knew I could try it. But even if I put in an order now, it would be at least two-weeks before it arrived on the island. And then what? Just another rabbit trail to chase, increasing doses.

She could no longer make it through the day without feeling the kick. Her night activities had become too dangerous, and I had to secure her to the bed at night.

Desperation makes monsters of us all.

Dopamine release. Tied down to the bed, I see her body there, but not her soul.

I search for the person I loved somewhere in there, struggling to get out. I climb onto her, her mouth snapping and spitting as I search for her. She bites at my flesh as I bring her closer, her teeth gnashing harder as I start to hear her return to me.

Oh god. Oh god, oh god..... Sully, oh, Sully. And she has returned to me.

I untie her, and she falls asleep on my shoulder - with me, for the moment at least.

XVIII

"Give me liberty or give me death."

Patrick Henry kept his wife locked in the cellar while she battled dementia. But that was a different time. A time before we knew anything about medicine, or treatment.

The dark ages of medicine.

The person you really are is the person you become when no one is watching... What have I become? A man who tries to make the ends justify the means.

I am failing her. I am failing her and I don't know how to fix it. I have created this. I did this, and I don't know how to save her.

Her hunger for the kill grows stronger, and I cannot continue to tie her down and deny what has become her nature.

So I stop.

And each night, she slips into the darkness.

Each night, returning with scrapes and bruises, covered in blood, most of it not hers.

XIX

The not knowing was what was killing me. The unknown always kills me. I had to know what she was like... *during*. So I follow her into the jungle.

I hear where she is first. The screams of the animals. Then they stop. She must be feeding. I slowly creep upon the clearing. More sounds. Perhaps scavengers, coming to take the leftover. Animal sounds. I push back the leaves to watch her, prepared to witness the savagery of her kill.

But nothing I could have imagined would have prepared me for what I saw.

Her... with him.

Pablo, the native errand-boy whom I had left for dead months ago had become a feral monster. He was with her... feeding on her as he was with her. and she fed off him. Covered in blood, they clawed at each other... hungrily. A hunger that I had denied her.

It was instinctive. It was not a thought.
Call it what you will, but it was just an action.

I came up behind him and put the shotgun to his head... then it disappeared. I didn't hear the sound. Only her cries.

What did you do?

She hits at me.
What did you do?

How could you be with him?

What did you do? How could you?

He was like me! He was like me. You don't want me. I am a monster, he was like me.

That's why the regression was getting faster. He was feeding off her. She was feeding off him

Why?

You aren't with me! You aren't like me!

I'm trying to save you!

You are out there trying to save me... you are so far away... Why- WHY!

She rages.

I take out a sedative and hit her with it.
It was a long walk back to the treehouse.

XX

As I laid her down, there was a message waiting for me.

“What are these new test results? The *Oncovir* seems to be doubling at this rate. The immune numbers are up, though. If you could transfuse her, her immune systems should be able to keep them in check.”

But these weren't her lab results. They were mine.

And there was no one else - no one to give me a transfusion.

I could still have a fighting chance. But one more feeding and I would be too compromised. More infection from her blood, more weakness from my own.

But it was only a sliver of a chance, at best.

That night, I slip into bed.

I'm sorry

I know. It's not your fault.

I'm... I'm sorry. Sully.

Yes.

Be with me.

I lie silent.

I need you. Tell me you love me.

I love you.

Tell me you'll never leave me.

I'll never leave you.

You're so far away. Be with me.

What would you give up?

I would give anything to be with you - to be where you are.

So I feed her.. and I am with her.

And nothing else matters.

Are we dead? Are we alive?

Are we nothing more than a living host, animated by this disease I created? Can we die?

It doesn't matter.

Everything in the world fades away. Like it always has.