

It was winter when I arrived at the Neighborhood. I saw smoke in the hills, rising from one of the houses, and the thought of people where I saw that smoke squeezed at my throat. I was drawn to it, then, wanted it for myself. I had to go and see just who was living there. I found people, and a few kids, creating a new life, a little community, trying to fight fear with numbers. By that time, I was so tired of living alone I decided to just stay in the Neighborhood that very first day.

And we did create a community, people living together in houses that we made our own, using items left by the people who lived there before: furniture, clothes, some books. Fancy, well-kept houses with nice furniture and well-planned yards. We had running water and electricity. The neighborhood had been a wealthy one before. It was comfortable. It is true, though, that we had to walk a more than a few blocks to the store to get our food. I didn't understand why at the time, but the People didn't want to grow their own food. Some people knew how to raise vegetables; some had done so before that awful summer. But we preferred to go to the store and get cans and dried goods. Some of the women took flour, yeast, salt, and made bread, sharing with the entire community. But as we got close to a year after the sick madness, and the weather began to warm up again, these goods had mostly spoiled, and it became harder and harder to find food. The canned stuff was still good, but there's something about the smell of fresh bread that always put me in a better mood and warmed my heart. We missed fresh bread more and more as the spring progressed.

Time went on and our community grew, as families, and others, straggled into the neighborhood, looking for comfort. The People, we called ourselves. I can see the humor in this; I could then too. It seemed so pompous, and grand. Biblical. But I found

solace and comfort with this group of people, even as I kept some distance between myself and the others. And even though I never thought or wanted to find another man to share my life with, I enjoyed the companionship. It answered the longing I was so familiar with.

What I enjoyed most is having people for whom I could care. I fell back into my old and familiar role of nurse, and the acceptance that came from it. In the first few months after I joined the People, some were still feeling the effects of the illness, and though most babies and small children died early on, from the illness itself, or the violence that came with it, my training made me a needed and welcomed member of the community. The effects lasted for a while, shaking, sudden, bursts of violence. I was treating people with remnants of the disease for more than a year after the madness first broke out. They were vivid reminders of those who had died and the fear that the living still felt.

This lasting existence of symptoms led us to designate one house on the block as a kind of hospital, or maybe a jail, to keep the violent safe, and the rest safe from violence. And then we tried to ease their suffering when they were not able to move anymore, dressing their sores and giving water when they could keep it down. We were so scared then. We didn't know what had happened or why. We didn't know if the illness would suddenly come back. We did not know we'd escaped the worst of it. Communication broke down early and remained down. We had no way of knowing much of anything beyond our few houses.

But the community gave us a sense of normalcy. People made homes for themselves, and new families, ignoring how strange the new houses felt at the

beginning, or the new “families” in them. It almost seemed to me we were all in a play, pretending to be people we were not, people who had not experienced the horrors of the madness and the devastation it brought.

Nearly a year after people stopped dying, the People were losing hope in reaching others. In warm months some of us had made day trips, even occasional overnight trips to look for others in our area. then, in the colder winter months, these trips were more rare, and we kept casual watch for people we thought might find us. We hoped that some group of people, doctors maybe, or government officials, would find us and help us restore the security that had been taken from us. And as the physical reminders of the illness faded, then, finally, vanished, and the hope of restoring our old lives dwindled, remembering the disaster became more difficult, not because we were truly forgetting, but because the remembering itself was more painful. We were forgetting faces and our old lives, but not completely, and the half remembrances brought us pain. It was now close to two years after the horror first hit all of us. And even though the days were lengthening again, nobody talked about making a trip anymore. We had given up.

Around this time, we found Judy, or rather she found us. She walked into our neighborhood in early spring, when the flower plants were just beginning to show young leaves and their color was at its first, freshest, most overwhelming abundance. Plants in most places did not escape humans’ madness, they were burnt and broken by the ill. But these, in our quiet neighborhood, survived.