

ME, MYSELF, AND THE BODY

I've never driven a pickup before. If someone else survived the blast, I'd get them to drive, but I don't think anyone did. I've walked this far, though, and it'll be such a relief to get off my feet.

The engine curses at me, and I curse back. I throw a glance to Brick, who's laying haphazardly across the back seats, staining the leather with blood. I'm not sure I want to know what's crunching under my wheels as I force the truck to move. It lumbers across the pockmarked landscape, through yellow gas and ashes and ruins of people's trailers.

The truck isn't airtight, so I try to avoid the denser clouds, but there's already enough of the gas in the cabin that I'm starting to feel woozy. I can see the bright, oscillating light of the Sapsys tower in the distance. That was the last thing Brick said to me, *get to the Sapsys tower*. They knew this was coming. They *knew*. I don't know how, but they did. Maybe I should've paid more attention when they rambled about work over dinner.

At first I think I've hit something when my windshield goes black, a piece of fabric on the wind or something.

I slam on the brakes, startled by the darkness. Brick flies into the backs of the front seats and crumples on the floorboard. There's only so much I can see outside the windshield through

the fog reflecting my headlights back at me, and without the signal light, I can't quite tell which way I'm going.

The truck was facing towards the tower when it shut off, so I continue driving after I've gotten my wits about me. I think for a moment that Brick must be uncomfortable on the floor, but no, they're not. It's more uncomfortable for *me*, thinking they're not.

I don't see the others until they're swarming over the truck, taking advantage of my cautious speed. The thump of bodies tightens my chest as I remember the sound of Brick slamming into the old white fridge. There are a couple women clinging to the front windshield, and I stop out of fear of throwing them off. That just brings more of these people to jump into the back of the truck and bang on the windows.

There's no clear goal with these people, they haven't said anything coherent and they fight among each other for a space on my truck. This monster isn't getting anywhere with all this extra weight, though.

It's peculiar that they don't seem affected by the gas—the gas that's burning up my lungs and creating a thin layer of grease on the outside of the truck. When I dragged Brick into the truck, I was barely able to move or breathe; these people seem to be as nimble as ever.

I realize when I see the windshield woman's eyes.

The whites of her eyes have turned a sickly yellow, and her pupils are so wide I could fire a cannon through them. Most horrifyingly, they're leaking a sticky-looking substance that drips onto the glass. Her eyes are *melting*.

The putrid slime that comes up my throat makes me glad the truck isn't mine. I don't look up from where I've hunched over the wheel as I floor the pedal, blowing the people outside off the truck and leaving them in the dust and fog to dissolve into the dirt. My teeth are rattling with every bump and dip, but I don't stop.

When I manage to lift my head, I see the scenery blowing by and the blinking speed on the dash passing 90. Less panicked now that I'm away from those people, I ease onto the brake and come down to a safe speed to continue my journey towards the tower. Or, at least, I think I'm still going towards it. To be honest, I really don't know, and if I jolted the wheel even a little bit while I was flying down the dirt road I'm definitely going the wrong direction now.

If I got out I could tell, the road is kept a little neater than the surrounding land, but then I'd let more gas in the cabin. I'd bet my life on it, the gas is what made those people sick.

From inside the truck, I can't feel if I'm still on track. The road is rough already, I wouldn't notice if I started trudging through the unkept mud.

First I see the flashlights, long fuzzy beams of light through the fog, then I hear the commotion of the crowd. I slow the truck to a walking pace and approach. As I get closer, I can see fans as tall as a house blowing the fog away from a tall, thin tower. Around the tower and fans, hordes of civilians rushing towards a wall of heavily armed people in black bulletproof vests and dark grey cargo pants.

These false soldiers are shooting into the crowd, picking off anyone unlucky enough to be in the way. I can't tell if the civilians are sick or not.

I'm about to throw the truck in reverse and drive like hell when I hear an ear-splitting voice boom through the air, crackly like it's being amplified by an old megaphone but *far* too loud for one.

"We've got a Healthy, in the truck."

The soldiers pushing back the crowd keep firing, but another mass of them start making their way towards me. I know better than to try to run, but damn if I'm not convinced they're gonna kill me anyway.

I am approached by a grizzled white man in his late 50s, he's so tall he can meet my eye, even though I'm sitting in the cabin of the most jacked up truck I've ever seen. He's got a bulky mask covering his nose and mouth, but his eyes are exposed. Those eyes look like they've seen Hell and made the Devil shit himself.

"Talk to me, you Healthy?" he snaps. He sounds muffled through the glass.

"I think so..." I don't really know what he means by Healthy, but I'm not crawling on the ground and leaking yellow out of my eyes.

"Good. Listen real close," I miss some of what he's saying in the gunfire, "Run when I say so, see Davis over there? Run right to 'im and don't fucking stop for anything."

I look into the back of the cabin, where Brick is still dutifully laying on the floorboard.

“What about Brick?”

“Brick? The hell are you on, man?”

“My friend, in the back, I’m not leaving them.”

The man scowls. “Can she run?”

I shake my head.

“Then she ain’t coming. Get ready.” I feel the thunk as he puts his hand on the handle of the truck.

I’m not even thinking as I jump out. I can vaguely hear him yelling at me to stop as I throw open the back door and drag Brick out by their wrists. They’re heavier than I remember. Now that they’re over my shoulder I start running towards *David* or whatever his name was.

There’s a ringing in my ears as I get closer and closer to the gunfire, and I can feel the force of the fans trying to push me back the way I came, but I persist. David is gesturing at me to *hurry up*. I risk a glance over my free shoulder and see Hell-Eyes firing wildly at the people trying to follow us in.

He shoves me and Brick through the rattling chain-link gate and jumps through after us. David wrenches the two sides together and locks them up tight.

My head is trying to burst out through my eyes and my chest is tight. I can barely hear Hell-Eyes yelling at me as I tremble in the boot-marked mud. Brick is staring up at the sky, glassy eyes as wide as ever. Just once, I think I see their eyelids twitch, but I convince myself it’s just the shock.

David puts himself between me and Hell-Eyes, saying something about “Just a kid” and “Give him a break.”

They try to take Brick separately from me, but I won’t let them, so I’m forced to carry their body through the corroded halls of the Sapsys tower. Some of the glass interior windows are shattered, and there are workers in hazmat suits scrubbing the rooms they led to. I feel very under-dressed now. Hell-Eyes doesn’t seem bothered by the fact that those guys are suited up and we aren’t, but I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t unsettling.

Hell-Eyes leaves me and Brick in an airtight room with a single chair and desk. The desk is empty; nothing there for me to snoop around in. I saw a window as I was walking in, but I don't see it now that I'm on the inside. I have no idea who's watching me.

I prop Brick up in the chair, leaning them so they almost look like they're deep in thought. My lungs are already starting to clear now that I'm out of the fog, but my head is still spinning and I can't pin down a single thought to save my life.

After a dazed minute, a young woman in glasses slides open the door and stands in the frame with a clipboard. Her pen flies over the paper before she looks up at me.

"Name?" she asks.

"Who are you?" I shoot back.

She shakes her head. "Marissa, but that isn't important. I'm just collecting your information for the director of operations. What is your full, legal name?"

"Edward Riddle," I lie.

"Okay, and your friend?" She points at Brick with her pen.

Before I can answer, she gasps. "Oh! I know her! She worked in PR, yeah? Florence Reed?"

I feel my lip twitch, but manage to reply in an even tone. "*Their* name is *Brick*, but yes, they did work here."

"Yes, I do remember they said they were transgendered or something. If I could afford it, I would probably choose to be a man too, so much easier," she sighs. "Anyway, I'll let the director know you're here with a former employee, Mr. Riddle."

She's about to close the door again when she looks back. "And between you and me? Say as little as possible when he comes by."

With that, she locks me in the sterile room again.

Another glance around reveals the Sapsys logo imprinted on the desk and etched on the wall. I can barely see either insignia but they're undeniably there. This whole place is branded like a Louis Vuitton bag. You know, "Just in case you forgot, you're at Sapsys!"

I'd never been in a Sapsys facility before, Brick said it wasn't worth checking out. I have to disagree. They're running a whole sci-fi thing in here, it's like a spaceship. Admittedly, right now, it's a beaten-up and terribly intimidating spaceship, but under better circumstances I might've found the seamless walls and faux-military uniforms exciting.

For now? Definitely like getting kidnapped on *Star Trek*.

The door slides open again when I'm in the middle of asking myself what Kirk would do, revealing a tall man with greying hair standing outside. He has Hell-Eyes and David—was it David or Davis?—at his sides.

"Edward Riddle, is it?" he asks firmly.

I gulp and give him a slight nod. There's nothing about his bored gaze that makes me think he believes me.

"You may call me Director Smith or just Director, your choice. I'm here to talk to you about what you saw out there."

Heeding Marissa's warning, I don't respond.

This doesn't seem to surprise or bother him, and he continues. "You, of course, saw the Sapsys firearms division defending the tower from the Infected. Please rest assured that we rescued anyone who was Healthy, like you."

I remember sentient faces in the crowd, conscious screams, but I say nothing.

"The gas outside covers half the country—coordinated attacks at critical locations by, presumably, enemy spies."

I raise an eyebrow. "Is the gas not floyvs-beta?" I only remember the name because Brick wrote it on Sapsys-brand paper instead of saying it. Always. "And why call them Infected? It's not a disease, is it?"

Director Smith and the two mock soldiers maintain neutral faces. The three of them step inside and the door slides shut with a hiss.

“The gas,” Director Smith begins, “is no creation of Sapsys, make no mistake. Flovys-beta has not been synthesized yet, and even if it was, it isn’t meant to *melt organs*.”

Okay, note to self, listen better in the future.

“Right, my bad.”

The tension eases but does not dissipate from their tight faces. I can still practically see the sparks from their eyes threatening to set me alight if I let anything else out that they don’t like.

“We’re going to keep you here long enough to make sure there’s nothing in your system. We aren’t sure how long it can take for the poison to take effect in males yet, if it even does.”

And there’s the slip-up, not a disease after all. The people scrambling around outside seemed to think it took effect pretty quickly. But then again, I’m not convinced they were infected. *Infected*. It sounds like a video game enemy, like *The Last of Us* or something.

“This is all really formal, medical even, aren’t you guys a tech company?” I ask, now exasperated at the theatrics.

“Biotech, high security.”

“Right.” Brick didn’t make the kind of money a biotech company should be able to provide.

“This room is not suitable for the length of your stay, please follow Davis—” so his name *was* Davis “—down the hall, he’ll show you to a room. Please understand, when you get there, that this was only supposed to be an overnight facility for test subjects, but you are *not* a subject of any kind, you’re only being stored like one.” He chuckles.

I don’t really think this is a “chuckle” situation.

He wasn’t kidding about the test subject feeling, that’s for sure. This room is somehow more sterile than the other, and there are little monitors and locked cabinets along the walls. It’s like the most fucked-up doctor’s visit I’ve ever been to. Then they brought the needles.

There has to be something illegal about this. They're taking my blood and stuff. Isn't that protected or something?

After a few hours of this monotonous medical ritual my head clears of all the panic. After a few days, I am rightfully confused by the still-pristine state of Brick's corpse. Nobody else has said anything about it, and I'm starting to wonder if I'm dreaming. Every time they prick me, though, I'm quite certain I'm awake. I hate needles.

Sometimes, when I'm trying to sleep, I see Brick looking at me with those haunted eyes. It's the kind of stare the victim gives the audience in a horror movie right before the monster attacks them from behind. They're still pleading. *But I'm already at Sapsys, Brick...*

It was the first time they'd said "Sapsys" out loud since about a month ago. They came home pale and went right to bed at 4pm. They didn't even have dinner.

The nurses start bringing in big machines with wires. There's a wall outlet the size of my fist that they plug the main one into, then they hook it up to my head and body. They go on and on about how I seem fine, but continue to have traces of an alternate signature of flovys.

I don't think they were supposed to tell me what they were checking for, but I've found out that if you're nice enough, they'll tell you anything. Director Smith wasn't lying, it wasn't flovys-beta. It was, however, the chemical waste from their flovys production line.

That's not what's prolonging my stay, though. They have no idea how I came in contact with the alpha variation, which apparently hasn't even made it to production.

After one of the testing nights, they leave the machines. They're going to pick it right back up in the morning, so why not leave them?

Well, I've got some questions that they don't have answers to. And I have the audacity. That's why.

Brick is still sitting dutifully on the chair.

I gulp down my disgust and nerves, then drag the bundle of wires over to them. They don't move as I place diodes and arrange wires. Lucky them, they don't have to feel the itchy adhesive.

I guess I saw something I wasn't supposed to, because the doors flew open when I was in the middle of jotting down Brick's lingering words and a swarm of heavily-armed Sapsys employees came to rip the wires out of the machines.

I know now that Brick flinched internally at the jolt from the unexpected disconnect. The nurses were usually more careful than that.

They took Brick. I kicked and screamed as they zipped their body up in a bag and took it away. A few hours afterwards, they brought me some water. It was warm and unsatisfying, but I started to feel better afterwards, like all my fear was melting away. It's a little blurry after that.

Davis came back a few days later after a seemingly endless stream of strange "nurses" in Sapsys uniforms, none of them the kind ones who held my hand during scans and told me about employee drama. He handed me a single sheet of paper with a wall of tiny text and a Bic pen, explaining that I could agree to complete silence about my stay in the facility, everything I saw in my neighborhood, and anything Brick told me about Sapsys, in exchange for complete financial support from Sapsys. Anything my heart desired, within reason, they said.

It took me a while to decide; Davis had to leave and come back. The legal jargon didn't make any sense to me at all, even though it was just a page and written in probably the most simple language they legally could. The way they explained it, though, made it the best option.

My other choice being leave with nothing and fend for myself in the decimated rows of trailers for as long as I could.

They cleaned up the spill. As far as the public knows, Sapsys had nothing to do with it. I know better. You don't have fans that big for no reason. There are a bunch of Infected being treated in hospitals now, but there are just as many rotting in the dirt around Sapsys Plant #5505. I figured out which one I was at from the header on all the papers they gave me after I signed.

Doesn't matter, though. I wouldn't have had food or water. I would only have lasted as long as I could loot from the homes and bodies of people I once knew.

I don't think White-Girl cares about any of that.

She's got broccoli and kale in her cart, along with some juice drink that's probably a fad. The cashier stands awkwardly behind the plexiglass, holding the object of contest: my Sapsys dependent card.

"Do you think you deserve that flag if you're siding with the enemy?" She points at the pride flag on my ratty backpack. "Don't you care about your people?"

I can almost feel my Sapsys guard's eyes digging into me like acid from across the room. He's kept his mandated fifty feet, but with the wire running down my body there's no way he can't hear me. Apparently, I signed away my right to privacy when I took the deal.

"I don't know you," I tell White-Girl firmly.

"Traitor. Don't you know they backed the CisComp Deal? How can you wear your flag in good conscience, you privileged fuck?"

She has no idea.

"They're the ones behind flovys-alpha too, haven't you read the news lately?"

"I haven't, and I don't know you."

"Is it because the alpha variation doesn't affect men like you? Huh? Comfortable you can't become a sentient corpse?"

"I didn't know it didn't, and I *don't know you*."

"Would you like a bag?" the cashier interrupts.

I shoot him a grateful glance. "Yes, please."

White-Girl is left to check out with the cashier who's clearly not in a hurry to let her after me, and my security tails behind me as I walk to my car. Fortunately, they haven't forced me to have a personal driver yet, I still have that much.

When I park in the covered spot in front of my apartment, I instinctively look to see who's waiting at the door for me. I think it's Kevin, but I can't really tell with the way he's leaning out of the light.

I take my groceries out of the back and lock my car. There's more gas damage on it than when I left this morning. Oh, yeah, when I say, "cleaned up," I mean it doesn't kill people anymore. You can still cough and choke on the thick air and metal doesn't like it if you leave it in a cloud too long. But it doesn't kill you anymore. Thanks, Sapsys.

I walk up to my apartment and see that it is definitely Kevin. He's the only one who's comfortable enough with me to wear a tee shirt on his shifts.

"Kev," I acknowledge.

"Sage," he responds flatly.

The lock fights me, and I glare at Kevin, who does nothing to help. He's probably picking his nose or something.

"As long as you don't die or snitch, kid, they sign my paycheck." He told me once.

The groceries go in the fridge, and I go to the couch with a beer. Kevin raises an eyebrow.

"How'd you swing that one? Elizabeth enforces the sobriety rule."

I pop the top. "Elizabeth was sick today. Beta poisoning."

"Better than Alpha," he grunts.

"I don't think she cares."

"Nah, she's started seeing George, you know that man wants a white-picket-fence kind of family."

Brick wanted a white picket fence. Said we would make the neighbors foam at the mouth. I didn't get why they were so set on that when they couldn't even stand up for themselves at work, but I recently realized that was exactly why.

Well, I don't have a white picket fence, Brick, I think at the small picture of them I have framed on the counter between the kitchen and the living room, I'm alive, though, I guess that's all I can ask for.

Kevin grabs a drink of his own from my six-pack. I roll my eyes. If I don't tell anyone about that, he doesn't tell anyone about any of *my* unapproved activities or the pile of machines and wires that's been building in the closet.

"Here's to our overlords," he raises his bottle. "And the shit the two of us get away with."

Here's to Sapsys, which, other than Kevin, hasn't yet realized this apartment is full of me, myself, and the body.