

SHELTER IN PLACE



SAUL TANPEPPER

A STANDALONE STORY FROM THE WORLD OF **BUNKER 12**

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A standalone story in the world of
BUNKER 12



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TANPEPPER

SHELTER IN PLACE

When her elementary school goes into lockdown, a third grade teacher shifts into survival mode. But she'll soon discover that the children under her charge pose as much risk as any threat waiting outside her door.

by Saul Tanpepper

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SHELTER IN PLACE

Allison Mullins was convinced that the three-quarter-inch gap beneath her classroom door would be the death of her.

That's what she always said, anyway, complaining to anyone who would listen: "The rain blows in and makes the linoleum slippery. You don't know how many times I've almost fallen because of it."

Once, a few weeks after the term started, she told her fiancé that as soon as the weather turned cold, rats would start coming in. James laughed and kissed her on the lips in that way that turned her bones to jelly. He told her he doubted anything so large could squeeze through such a small space.

"Spiders or cockroaches, maybe," he said. "But not rats."

She knew he was only teasing, but the offhand remark stuck with her. Images of vermin would pop into her mind at the most inopportune moments, like the time they were making love in their tiny one-room apartment.

She told the janitor about the gap, but he punted the issue up to Maintenance, who said the work order had to come down from the principal. The principal promised to install some foam weather stripping the first chance he got.

But each morning she'd come in to find that nothing had been done about it. She'd have to sweep out the dead leaves that had blown in overnight. She even took to tweezing apart the little aggregated piles with her fingers, searching for evidence of vermin—mouse droppings and such.

Afterward, she'd scrub her hands raw in the scalding water from the sink in her en suite bathroom, even though she'd worn disposable latex gloves. She worried about the diseases that might be lurking in the filth.

There hadn't been any droppings. Not yet, anyway, but she knew it was inevitable. The rats would come in sooner or later, drawn by the warmth and the food her third graders left in their desks or dropped onto the floor. And with them would come the germs. She adored the kids and knew they didn't mean to be messy. It was just the way they were. In fact, she often told her colleagues at staff meetings that she had the best classroom in the whole school.

But then she'd remember the door and say, "If it weren't for that damn gap."

And the other teachers would make sympathetic noises and pat her on the shoulder, as if to show their solidarity.

But none of their doors had gaps.

* * *

The day of the emergency lockdown started out just like any other. The morning air was crisp, the sunlight blinding, and the children their usual ebullient selves. Hearing their joyful shouts always brought a grin to Allison's face. When the early bell rang, she lined them up outside her classroom and gave them each a squirt of hand sanitizer from the bottle she kept on the counter. Hygiene was an important part of her curriculum.

Instruction proceeded as usual—mathematics followed by social science. Then came a break. She lined the students up to go play outside so she could meet with a parent.

Rodney Cundiff was one of those high-energy kids—bright and aggressively inquisitive, yet completely unable to focus on any one task for longer than five minutes. His parents were the same way. They'd flit in and out of class with little regard for Allison or the students until she finally had to ask them to call ahead first.

June Cundiff was waiting outside the door when the children filed out. As usual, Rodney was at the very front

of the line, his antics already causing the students behind him to misbehave. Distracted by thoughts of playtime, he failed to notice his mother as he passed her, despite her calling his name and reminding him to keep his hands to himself.

The meeting was brief and pointed. June wanted to know if it might be possible for Rodney to skip the afternoon's language arts sessions, which took place in the school's crowded library. "He sees all those books," she told Allison, "and it's almost too much for him to handle. He'd be better off sitting quietly in the classroom reading on his own."

Allison agreed, though she doubted it would make much difference to the boy. She didn't mention that a couple parents had complained about Rodney's behavior, or about the librarian bringing him up to her on various occasions.

"I'll be dedicating some one-on-one time with another student as well," she told the worried-looking Mrs. Cundiff. "It's really no problem."

Relief flooded the woman's face, and she reached out to clasp hands with her son's teacher. The uninvited contact left Allison feeling icky. Her skin itched where the stiff white bandage on the tip of the woman's finger had scratched it.

After Mrs. Cundiff left, Allison washed her hands, then put sanitizer on for good measure.

By noon, ominous storm clouds had rolled in, accompanied by strong wind gusts and the first fat drops of what promised to be a considerable shower. The children's behavior reflected the weather, growing increasingly boisterous. Forced to lunch inside at their desks, the classroom soon descended into a state of near-chaos. By the time Allison sent them off for their library session, she was more than ready for a little peace and quiet.

After the others left, she provided Rodney and Sanja, a meek Pakistani girl, with their reading instructions and returned to her desk for a few moments to decompress.

Rodney lasted all of ninety seconds before he was up and chasing the leaves swirling in beneath the door. She asked him to sit down. Another blast of wind rattled the door against the frame, sending in a spray that dampened the threshold. Rain lashed at the windows and rattled the gutters.

Allison stood up to peek through the closed blinds, which the school had installed as part of the district's new shooter-deterrence strategy, and gave the dark sky a worried look. The six-foot eave proved to be insufficient protection and promised her students a good soaking when they returned from the lesson. Allison was not looking forward to spending the last hour of the day teaching a classroom full of damp, shivering students who would be incapable of paying attention.

"Miss Mullins? Rodney's making mud."

Allison turned away from the window just as the school's alarm began to blare. A yelp of surprise escaped through her lips.

"Attention, all teachers and staff!" Principal Barden announced over the intercom. His voice crackled with static, and there was a low buzz of people speaking over each other in the background. "Please shut and lock your doors immediately! This is a shelter-in-place order, not a drill! All lockdown procedures must be followed! I repeat, lock your doors, shut off all lights and A/V equipment. Close your blinds. Take shelter away from your windows. Remain silent and await further instructions. This is not a drill!"

"What's happening, Miss Mullins?" Sanja asked, tugging at Allison's sleeve.

"I don't know, sweetie. Just do as we practiced. Rodney! Get away from the door now! Onto the sharing mat, both of you!"

She flipped the lights off, then checked that the door was locked. With the blinds closed, a gloom swept through the room nearly as dark as night. Feeling her way to her desk, she grabbed her purse from the drawer, then made her way through the obstacle course of tables and chairs to the back corner of the classroom.

"Where's Rodney?" she asked. "Rodney!"

"Bathroom," he replied from somewhere near the middle of the classroom.

"*Bath*," Allison corrected, before reminding herself to keep quiet. "And you don't need to go. Come sit with us."

"What about the other kids?" Sanja asked.

"They'll be fine, honey," she whispered, but nonetheless turned a worried glance out into the empty room. "As long as they listen and follow directions, they'll be fine. And so will we. *Rodney*? Did you hear me?"

The administration had conducted an active-shooter training exercise the week before school started. The drill was only supposed to last a half hour, just long enough for each teacher to run through the checklist of items they were supposed to do, but it had ended up dragging on much longer than that. She remembered growing impatient, resenting the fact that she wasn't being paid to sit alone in the dark doing nothing. She needed the time to prepare her new classroom.

It had been during that drill that Allison first became aware of the gap beneath the door. Sitting quietly in the darkness, she had watched the shadows crisscrossing the threshold as the administrators and emergency personnel passed by outside conducting their own checks. She could hear them talking and laughing. Twice, someone had stopped to jiggle her doorknob. At least one of those times

had been her principal. There was no mistaking the tangerine glow of his trademark sneakers.

She reflected how sad it was that the greatest risk to the children came in the form of suicidal mass murderers. She'd grown up in California and the Midwest, and the drills back then had been for earthquakes and tornadoes, respectively. Her father told stories of learning how to duck and cover beneath his desk as a child. He'd grown up on the East Coast during the Cold War, when the daily noon siren from the firehouse was a carryover from the nuclear alert system and its wail could be heard for miles around.

Those air raid drills now seemed quaint by comparison.

"Rodney!" she whispered in as loud a voice as she dared. "What are you doing?"

There was no answer.

"I'll be right back," she told Sanja, standing up and pulling away from the girl's anxious grip. "Rodney, where are you?"

The door to the bathroom opened and a tidal wave of light flooded into the class. Rodney surfaced in the middle of it wiping his hands on his pants. Allison hurried over and grabbed his elbow. "Did you wash?"

"Yes, Miss Mullins. I even used soap."

She reached over and flipped off the light. "We need to get over to the mat and sit quietly! Do you want me to get in trouble?"

"No, Miss—"

The classroom telephone rang, filling the room with its harsh jangle. An impressive facsimile of the sound burred out of Rodney's mouth. He laughed and broke away from her, disappearing into the warren of desks. She could hear him crawling underneath them, banging his head, knocking pencils and books to the floor. But at least he was moving in the direction of the sharing mat.

She turned her attention toward the phone, which rang again before she could reach it. Groping blindly over the

surface of her desk, she finally located the receiver and lifted it to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Alli? Oh, thank——your cell——straight to voice mail."

"James?"

Up until that moment, she'd not felt much alarm. Despite the note of urgency in the principal's voice and the confusion of background speakers, she had remained calm, confident that whatever the problem was, it would quickly resolve itself. She'd heard no gunshots outside. And all of the classroom doors opened into a gated quad that was locked during the day, requiring visitors to enter through the main office, so it was unlikely that anyone had gotten in. She figured someone had either called in a fake threat or something had happened in one of the neighboring businesses.

But now a bolt of panic arced through her body. James knew she kept her cell phone on silent mode during the day, so something must have upset him enough to forget. He also knew that the classroom line was only supposed to be used for emergencies.

"What is it, honey?" she asked.

"Is your door locked?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "My door?"

"Is it locked?"

"Y-yes. How did you——"

"Do not open it!"

"Honey, you're scaring me. What's happening? Where are you?"

"——work. We're——ockdown too——the news——"

"James?"

"——check on you, make sure you——up the gap."

"Gap? I can't understand you. You're breaking up."

"——go outside. Stay safe. Don't worry."

"Go outside?"

"——news and——everywhere is——"

"James? There's something wrong with the connection. James?" She pulled the receiver away from her ear and looked at it. But it was just a stupid desk phone without a screen and so it offered no clue to the problem. She banged it against her palm. "James?"

A series of mechanical clicks came through the tiny speaker. Then silence for a couple seconds. Finally, the dial tone returned. James was gone.

"Miss Mullins?"

"*Shh*, Sanja. Just a minute. I'll be right there."

She punched in James's number, her fingers skittering blindly over the keypad in the darkness. Nothing happened. She tried again, and the result was the same, except that now there wasn't even the sound of an open line when she pressed the disconnect button.

"Miss Mullins?"

In her agitation, she missed the cradle. The handset tumbled to the floor.

"Miss Mullins!"

"Yes, Sanja," she said impatiently. "What is it?"

"Rodney took his shirt off."

Allison rolled her eyes. She didn't bother retrieving the receiver. The damn phone wasn't working anyway. She took a deep breath and told Rodney to put his shirt back on.

"He's taking his socks and shoes off, too."

Let him. I couldn't care less if he stripped down to his underwear and started doing jumping jacks on the desks.

No, actually I do. He'd probably fall off and break an arm. And the school would be sued, and I'd lose my job.

"Rodney, put—Ow! Put your socks and shoes back on and go sit down on the sharing mat."

Her head pounded. Her shin hurt. She was dangerously close to hyperventilating. And why? Because their phone call had been disconnected?

Because James knew. Because he called the classroom to ask if my door was locked. Why would he do that?

And how did he know she was on lockdown anyway?

His tenth-floor office was five blocks away. She couldn't see his building from her window, as it faced the wrong direction, but he should be able to see the school from his. Was he watching it right now? What was he seeing?

She made her way over to the window and peeked through the blinds. The rain was coming down in sheets now, sometimes vertically, sometimes swirling in underneath the eaves. The courtyard was empty. Nobody was out there, and nothing was happening. She couldn't imagine a shooter—or anyone else for that matter—wanting to be out in that mess.

Did he say that he was on lockdown, too? She couldn't remember. And if so, what could be so big as to cover such a large area?

Gas leak?

She remembered the gas explosion in California several years back. That had been a terrible tragedy, so many killed. She sniffed the air and detected nothing but the sharp tang of the season's first rain.

Maybe a chemical spill?

Nuclear radiation?

Each new potential threat ushered in an even more fantastic and deadly one after it.

Solar flare?

Is that why he told her to stay inside? And had she heard him correctly? Did he mention something about the gap?

Her eyes drifted over to the door.

I should seal it up.

She decided to get her cell phone and dial James back.

"Miss Mullins?"

Allison turned around, sighing. "Rodney, I told you to put your clothes back on."

"He did, Miss Mullins."

"Then what is it now, Sanja?"

"I have to go to the bathroom. Bad."

"Of course you do, honey. Well, come on. Can you see?"

"Not very much."

There was a bump, the sound of something soft hitting something hard, like a thigh or arm on the edge of a desk, followed by a muffled cry.

Allison held the blinds away a little more, allowing some of the sparse light to filter in. What could it hurt? There was no one out there anyway.

Except someone was.

Her breath locked in her throat as she squinted into the gray haze.

Principal Barden?

She'd recognize those glowing orange shoes anywhere. But why was he out there in the pouring rain, stumbling around like that? Especially during a lockdown?

Frowning, Allison let the blinds fall back into place. She went over and helped Sanja to the bathroom door. "You may turn on the light, but only *after* you close the door, okay? And you have to turn it off again before you come out."

"I know."

She wondered what mischief Rodney was getting into as she waited by the bathroom listening to the drone of the rain. A metal flap kept clacking somewhere in the heating vent in the wall near the ceiling.

"What are you doing, Rodney?"

Paper crinkled somewhere in the middle of the room. "Eating lunch," he mumbled past a mouthful of food.

"You just ate lunch twenty minutes ago."

"I'm hungry again."

Allison shook her head. "Don't spill. We'll get rats." And she glanced over to the door again, her skin prickling.

Or other creepy-crawly things.

Stuff something in the gap, Alli. Do it before it's too late.

But nothing was coming in, nothing except rain illuminated by a pale, thin rectangle of light reflecting off the damp floor. She felt silly.

The toilet flushed.

"Sanja pooped," Rodney said, suddenly materializing beside Allison.

"Rodney! Don't sneak around like that. You scared me."

"Sanja pooped."

"Why would you say such a thing?"

"It's true. She told me she had to go poo—"

"Okay, I got it. Stop saying that. It's not polite."

The bathroom door opened. Thankfully, no light spilled out.

"Did you wash your hands?" Rodney sang.

"Yes," the girl replied.

"With soap?"

"Um..."

"Never mind, Sanja. Rodney, mind your own business. Both of you go sit down on the sharing mat. Hurry up."

"I have to poop, too," Rodney said.

"No, you don't." She waited for him to protest. "That's what I thought. Now, please, can we just do what we're supposed to do? It's very important that we follow instructions."

She found their hands in the darkness, grimacing at the clamminess on each of them, and led them toward the back corner of the room. She glanced once more at the front door and considered whether she should get some paper towels out of the bathroom to mop up the rain.

"Sit down, both of you," she ordered. "Be quiet."

"How long?" Rodney asked.

"I don't know. Hopefully not much longer."

"Ten minutes?"

"I don't know. Be quiet and it'll go faster."

"How do you know?"

"Because I said so."

Gah! I'm turning into my mother!

"Miss Mullins, do you want some pretzels?"

"I already have— Where did you get those?"

"I found them on the floor."

"Oh, Rodney."

She located her handbag at the edge of the sharing mat. Its contents had been disgorged in a scattered heap. The bag of pretzels she kept for her after-school prep work was gone.

"Just ... share those with Sanja if she wants some," she told the boy, and she swept everything else back into the bag. Her fingers fumbled the lid off a small plastic bottle of hand sanitizer that she kept with her. The gel felt cool on her skin and soothed her nerves.

The door rattled as another spray of rain lashed against it. The puddle in the entryway inched across the tiles toward the carpeting. Allison leaned her head back and hoped her other students were faring as well or better in the library. She prayed the poor librarian was holding out.

James. I was going to call James back.

He'd told her not to worry, but how could she not? He had known about the lockdown. What more did he know?

She woke her cell phone and frowned to see that there were over three dozen text messages waiting for her. Were they all from James?

He would sometimes leave her a message or two during the day—typical stuff, just touching base. MISS U or LUV U or SUSHI SHACK 2NITE?

Sometimes her best friend from the school she'd taught at the previous year would text to see if she wanted to meet for a commiseration drink before heading home. Their favorite bar was just a subway stop up the street from their apartment building.

And then there was her mom, who seemed completely incapable of teaching herself texting shorthand, yet had somehow mastered the voice-to-text option on her phone, which meant that her messages ran on and on and were sometimes completely incomprehensible. The phone just couldn't seem to handle her thick Southern drawl. James, who wrote legal briefs and therefore had a high tolerance for inchoate babble, found the phone's hapless attempts to transcribe the messages an endless source of amusement.

But *three dozen*? That wasn't just unusual, it was alarming.

She quickly thumbed through the list, seeing texts from her family and friends, but also from the parents of her students:

PLZ CALL WHN U HAV CHNC
HOW'S MY CHELSEA?
RU SAFE?

She was beginning to wish she'd checked her phone sooner, because the number of messages meant that something truly frightening was happening out there. She intended to respond to each of them, but for some reason the cell signal kept falling to zero.

"Miss Mullins?"

She pushed Sanja's hand away and shushed her.

The more recent texts took on an increasingly alarming tone:

LOCK YOUR DOOR PLEASE
STAY INSIDE!
DONT OPEN UR DOOR
CANT GET THERE KEEP TOMMY SAFE
PLEASE!!!

DONT TOUCH ANYONE
TELL RODNEY MOMMY AND DADDY LOVE
HIM AND DONT GO OUTSIDE

She read them all, each and every one, and by the time she came to the last, her hands shook so badly she could barely hold the phone.

*What the hell is going on? Why isn't anyone telling us?
What was the principal doing out there?*

The phone on her desk suddenly started squawking, startling her with its raucous off-the-hook angry-bird cry.

"I'll fix it!" Rodney shouted, and he jumped up.

"No! Wait—"

Objects crashed to the floor as he ran to find the receiver.

"Rodney!"

The intercom crackled and the voice of the school secretary, Mary, came on just as the phone noise stopped. Rodney let out a triumphant shout: "I fixed it! Miss Mullins, I fixed it!"

"Attention, teachers, staff," Mary said. She sounded tired, and more than a little frightened. "The lockdown is still in effect. We apologize for not communicating sooner, but the power was out. We've been able to start the emergency generator."

That's why Barden was out there.

A phone rang in the background. Someone answered it.

"A state of emergency has been called," Mary relayed, "and we have been advised that the conditions outside are highly unstable. All roads have been blocked, and parents are unable to pick up their children. Consequently, we must extend the shelter-in-place order past normal school hours."

"Miss Mullins?"

"*Shh*, Sanja. I need to hear this!"

"Unfortunately, we are unable to provide any more information at this time. All citizens have been ordered by the Department of Emergency Services to remain inside.

As a reminder, it is district-wide policy during a lockdown procedure to shut all curtains or blinds. Maintain silence as much as possible. We have also been told not to, under any circumstance, open any door, not for parents, not even for your own family, until the lockdown has been officially lifted."

"Why?" Sanja asked, her voice hitching. "I want my mommy."

Allison didn't answer. She was concentrating on the telephone discussion in the background. As a result, Mary's warnings flew past her like driven snow, pelting the skin of her consciousness but leaving no lasting impression other than a vague chilling effect. It was the other conversation which froze her to the core.

Principal Barden is dead? But I just saw him!

Her knees buckled, and she sank to the floor.

Maybe I heard wrong.

Yes, that had to be it. Maybe the speaker had said that Principal Barden was ... was

In bed?

Or maybe they said the power was dead. That made more sense.

"The safety of your students is your highest priority," Mary concluded. "It is your only priority. As soon as new information becomes available, we will update you."

The intercom static clicked off.

"Miss—"

Something hit one of her windows, rattling the pane. It was harder than wind and bigger than raindrops. It squeaked as it rubbed over the glass.

"I heard something," Sanja said.

"It's just the storm," Allison whispered. She pushed herself back to her feet. "Rodney! Come back here right now!"

A shadow crossed over the door's threshold, lingered for a moment, then passed on. Ice flushed through Allison's veins.

"Here I am!" Rodney shouted, and he grabbed her arm. Allison screamed.

* * *

An hour passed before she managed to calm herself down enough to call James. Her mind had simply shut down. The kids clung to her sides and kept quiet through the entire ordeal, as if sensing her terror.

Her first attempt to dial resulted in nothing but dead air. The second returned her to the home screen after a few odd clicks. She stared at the phone, wondering if she'd misdialed or accidentally disconnected. Her hands trembled badly and her eyes refused to focus.

He answered right away the third time: "Alli? Oh, thank heavens! It's about time."

"About time? Do you have any idea what I've been going through? My phone's been on and you haven't called—"

"I did! Honey, what do you think I've been doing since we got cut off? I haven't been able to get a call out anywhere!"

"What's happening, James? I'm scared."

"Honestly, I don't know. I've been stuck here in the damn office. The partners left about an hour ago, followed by the junior lawyers."

"Left? Then why are you still there?"

There was a pause. "It's"

"What, honey?"

"I was going to leave, but I ... couldn't. It's a mess out there on the streets."

"On the streets?" She could hear the terror in his voice. "Honey, what is happening?"

"I said I don't know! The roads are blocked, cars are piled up everywhere, people are running around— *were* running around. Things seem to have calmed down a bit over the past two hours, but ... I'm looking outside now. The power's off everywhere as far as I can tell."

"Can you see the school?"

"Not through the rain. Everything's hazy. People are walking around like they're in some kind of a daze. Others are lying down in the middle of the street."

"Lying down? Are they—"

dead

"—hurt?"

"We're too high up to be sure, honey," he said, exasperation tightening his voice. "With the rain—and now it's getting dark—I can't see much. I heard gunshots earlier. I think they were gunshots."

"I haven't heard anything."

"The school walls might be blocking the sounds. Or the shots came from farther away. I think I can see something burning off in the distance."

"Burning? But—"

"Have you heard anything, Alli? Like on the radio, I mean. Local news. We're totally blacked out here. Tried the internet, but it's been spotty at best."

"I haven't had a chance to listen to the radio," she blurted out. But the truth was, she hadn't even thought to check. The room had a television. They got a few local stations over the airwaves. And she could access the internet on her phone. "We're not supposed to turn anything on."

"So you have power?"

"The school has a generator. Besides, I've got kids to watch."

The children beside her stirred. Sanja was dozing, and Rodney had found the modeling clay.

He's probably rubbing it into the sharing mat. It's going to be ruined.

But they were quiet, occupied. She didn't want to rile them.

"What have you heard?" she asked.

"Just what I've been able to pull off the web, whenever I can connect. Everyone's to stay inside, shelter in place. It's some kind of medical thing, a virus, they think."

Her eyes flicked obsessively to the gap beneath the door. "Is it airborne?"

"No, doesn't seem to be. But it's affected everyone."

"Everyone in the city?"

"Everyone everywhere."

"*What?*" she said, choking back a gasp.

"Miss Mullins," Rodney said. "You have to be quiet. It's the rules."

"Yes, I know. You're right. I'm sorry." She stood up and moved away from the children before bringing the phone back to her ear. She cupped her hand over it so the kids wouldn't hear. "Honey, what do you mean everywhere?"

"*Everywhere* everywhere, hon. I don't know. There hasn't been anything new on the feed in a while, but what is there suggests this thing spread quickly. It's all over the place. All over the world!"

He sounded about as close to panic as she'd ever heard anyone come.

Bioterrorism?

"How can that be?"

There was a muffled explosion in the distance. It might have been thunder, except the storm hadn't been electrical. *It's a transformer*, she thought. *A transformer somewhere got wet and blew.*

But then there came another, louder and close enough that she could feel it through the floor. A car alarm somewhere began to bleat.

"That was a big bomb."

"That wasn't a bomb, Rodney."

"I said boom, Miss Mullins. Did you think I said bomb?"

"James?"

She pulled the phone away from her ear. The log showed that the call had terminated. There was no signal, not even a flickering.

"James, are you there?"

"I said boom," Rodney grumbled unhappily, and settled back onto the carpet with his clay.

* * *

She couldn't understand how there could be no internet.

No phone, okay. That she could see. Land lines were notoriously vulnerable to disruption. And if the towers were down, then she wouldn't be able to call or connect to the web. But the school still had power. The Wi-Fi was still on, and she knew for a fact that it was delivered by cable, which should be more reliable. She could even log on to it.

Problem was, there seemed to be nothing on the other end to connect to. All of her links and searches gave her the same HTTP 404 - PAGE NOT FOUND error.

She'd never felt so isolated in her life. Even with the children huddled tight against her, she felt incredibly alone.

They played word games and math games and told jokes and riddles until they were left with nothing but Rodney's potty humor, and even then she let them continue for a little while, at least until she worried there might be reprisals if their parents ever found out. She told them stories from memory, and when that stopped holding their attention, she played them music from her phone, keeping the volume turned down so that Rodney had to concentrate hard to hear it, which helped to keep him quiet.

The world outside disappeared as day turned into night. And in the silence that replaced the receding storm, she

began to hear other noises—water running through pipes, eerie scratching sounds in the walls, the disembodied voices of children in neighboring classrooms, crying, shouting. She sympathized with her colleagues, knowing that they were burdened with dozens of children to entertain, to keep calm, to feed and discipline. Allison felt guilty at how grateful she was for only having her two. She couldn't imagine having thirty.

They had more than enough to eat, what with all of the unopened packages of chips and fruit bars and loose cookies they'd scrounged. They rescued half-eaten sandwiches and uneaten fruit from the absent children's lunchboxes. For once, she didn't care about germs, as long as Sanja and Rodney were happy. At least they wouldn't have to scavenge through the trashcans, like she knew the other teachers were probably being forced to do.

It'll be over soon. The police will come, and it'll be over. Or the military will arrive to take us all to a big shelter somewhere.

She told her kids their parents would come for them as soon as they could. She didn't know when, but she said it wouldn't be too much longer.

With night came the most difficult part of her watch. The children became restless. They were bored and scared and missed their families. They wanted their pillows and stuffies and nightly routines, which Allison could not give them.

Finally, they drifted off to sleep on the sharing mat covered in the coats that had been left behind. Soon after, the ruckus in the adjacent classrooms also faded away. True quiet descended upon them.

Lulled by the soft metronomic rhythm of the clock on the wall, Allison began to drift off.

Tap. Tap tap.

Tap tap tap.

“Anyone there?”

She jerked upright, her senses on high alert.

"Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

She pushed herself to her feet and scrambled over to the opposite wall, toward the source of the voice.

"Rosa?"

Rosa McBroom was the fourth grade teacher next door. Her voice sounded hollow coming through the vent.

"Alli?"

"I can barely hear you."

"I don't want to wake the kids. I had one who kept trying to run outside. I was about ready to strangle Anyway, they're finally asleep. How are you holding up?"

"Me? Fine." She didn't tell Rosa that she had only her two to contend with. "I just hope we get paid time and a half for this."

Rosa laughed quietly, but Allison detected a hint of hysteria in it. "Roger called during lunch," she said. "Right before we went into lockdown."

"So you knew this was coming? You had advance warning?"

"Five minutes, if you call that advance."

"I tried James afterward, but we kept getting disconnected. The cell signal comes and goes. What did Roger say?"

"Before the power went off, the news was calling it some kind of unknown pathogen, maybe viral. Same thing on the internet. Whatever it is, it's extremely contagious."

"Like the flu? I thought they had that under control. And we've all gotten our vaccines, so—"

"Not the flu. Something worse. They said it has a hundred percent casualty rate and it affects you in less than an hour. Not even the flu was that bad."

Allison frowned. "If it's a virus, then why do we have to keep our blinds shut? It doesn't make sense."

Rosa didn't answer right away. Allison sensed that she was holding something back, and she pressed her to share.

"Roger said the people who catch it lose their minds. They go He said they go feral. That's the word he used. If they see you, they attack. Sort of like rabies. He said that's how it spreads."

"How? By ... biting?" Visions of the zombie apocalypse crossed her mind. James was a huge fan of the genre and binge-watched all the usual shows, no matter how gory, but she didn't care for any of it.

"We were cut off before he could say how," Rosa said. "And my phone's dead and I don't have my charger with me. And the classroom phone is—"

"Dead. I know. Mine, too."

Both women were quiet for several seconds. Finally, Rosa asked, "How's your cell phone?"

"It's ... dead," Allison lied. She still had thirty percent, but there were no bars. She normally had at least four here at the school, thanks to a nearby tower. But she didn't want to have to tell Rosa no. There was no sense in wasting what little battery she had left on frivolous attempts to call out when there was no signal.

"I'm scared, Allison."

"Me, too. But we're safe here."

"I hope so."

Neither of them spoke for a long time after that. Allison remained seated beneath the vent and took solace in knowing that her colleague was there too, just on the other side of the wall.

She may have dozed off, she wasn't sure. It was impossible to tell if her eyes were open or not or to tell the difference between being awake and asleep. Her gaze drifted over to the door, where she expected to see light from the lamps outside spilling in underneath. But there was none. The room was pitch black. Not even the tiny diodes from the television or the digital projector were lit. The clock above her head had also stopped ticking.

She slid herself up the wall and listened to the vent. The air was completely still, as if the school were holding its breath.

"I think the generator's out of gas, Rosa. There's no power."

There was no reply.

"Rosa?"

She thought she heard the same soft scratching sound she'd heard earlier, like something was rubbing against the wall on the other side.

"Rosa," she called again, a little louder, "are you there?"

In the corner on the sharing mat, the children stirred but did not wake. Allison found a chair and slid it underneath the vent, then carefully mounted it and pressed her ear against the cold metal. Sounds of movement became more distinct.

"Rosa? Anyone?"

The sounds stopped for a moment before resuming with greater urgency.

"Is everything okay over there?"

The next noise she heard chilled her to the bone. It sounded a little like snakes. Allison reeled back and nearly fell off the chair.

She wished she knew what was happening in Rosa's room. In *all* the rooms. Out there. She prayed everyone was okay.

It's not. Something happened. Something's wrong.

Using the light from her phone to guide her, she made her way over to the window. The pathway lamps were extinguished, the darkness outside as deep as it was inside. A few stars shone through the tattered clouds high above, distant pinpricks of white too faint to illuminate anything. There was no moon.

Scanning the quad, she could not find a single trace of light from any of the other classrooms. Someone could be out there and she wouldn't even know it.

* * *

Allison woke in the hour before dawn and slipped off toward the bathroom, once more using her phone for light. The battery was down to seventeen percent, and she silently cursed herself for not shutting it off earlier to conserve it.

The phone chirruped as she stepped to the door, notifying her of a slew of new text messages and calls. The signal strength kept wavering between one bar and zero, and her attempts to retrieve her voice mail messages were unsuccessful. Even worse, her battery strength plummeted to fourteen percent. She stepped over to the window hoping the signal would improve. It didn't.

The text messages were no different than the ones she'd seen the day before—pleas to keep the children safe and to not go outside, promises from parents that they'd do whatever it took to get to the school. Peter Cundiff, Rodney's father, was on his way with his wife.

She noted that his message had been sent less than twenty minutes before.

At least there's that. If the roads are clear, maybe the situation has improved.

She tried James's phone, but was rewarded with nothing but dead silence. And now her battery was down to eleven percent.

On a whim, she tapped on her news app and fretted while the hourglass kept spinning on the screen. The battery ticked down to ten. Then nine. Just as she was about to cancel, the page finally loaded. The top story was seven hours old. The headline read:

MYSTERIOUS INFECTION SPREADS ACROSS GLOBE

REUTERS | World | 10:08pm EST

Staff writer Steve Armady contributed to this article

GENEVA, Switzerland (Reuters) - The World Health Organization has confirmed that a devastating human contagion of unknown origin and makeup has swept across the world, infecting people in every nation on every continent.

The disease, a suspected neural pathogen, appears to target certain brain functions affecting motor control and self-restraint. It first appeared in the Washington DC Metro area at 10:47am EST, Wednesday, following several police reports of unusual assaults. Similar reports in all major cities across the globe hit news and social media sites within minutes.

Most infected individuals appear non-aggressive. However, violence has been observed in isolated cases and may be due to rapid degeneration of neurological processes. Transmission is highly efficient, requiring little more than skin-to-skin contact. Little else is known about the disease, which media have taken to calling the Flense, a reference to the horrific attacks perpetrated by some afflicted individuals. No explanation for its sudden and universal appearance has been offered.

Individuals are advised to remain indoors until further notice. Do not approach strangers. Avoid close contact with anyone suspected of being infected. Please stay off the streets so that health and safety professionals are able to perform their duties.

Her eye caught the trending topics on the page before her phone chirped out a critical low-battery warning. The top subject was **#globalinfection**, followed by:

#bioterrorism
#internetcrash
#callmecaitlin
#theflense
#nopower

After trying one last time to call James, she shut the phone off and removed the battery, believing it would help preserve that last five percent. Then she slipped both pieces into separate pockets of her slacks.

The darkness pressed against her, an unbridgeable gulf separating her from the rest of the world—her other students, her fiancé, her life. She felt as small as a mote, a speck of dust, an atom floating in space, flung into the vacuum by happenstance and buffeted by invisible forces far greater than the ones she could control. She wrapped her arms about her chest, as if she feared her body might suddenly disintegrate.

How could this be happening? How could it all go so bad so quickly?

A soft, slow tapping sound reached her ears. Thinking it was Rosa again, she made her way over to the vent. It took her several seconds to locate its true source, several more to work up the courage to pull the blind away from the window and peek outside.

A dark mass was huddled beneath the adjacent window; the shape was barely discernible, a darker shade than the black of night, and she realized with alarm that it was a person. Yet with it came the realization that she could see, if only the tiniest bit. The first light of morning had begun to bleach the ink from the sky. Relief flooded through her.

The figure appeared to be crouching in a loose ball. Pressed up against the wall, it was impossible to say whether it was a man or a woman. A hand reached up, pale

and bony in the wan light; the fingers pried at the bottom sill. The tapping was the click of nails on the window pane.

What are they doing? Who is it? Why are they out there?

And on the heels of those questions:

Do not approach strangers. Avoid contact with anyone suspected of being infected.

Stay inside. That's what the article had said. But the post was over seven hours old. Surely the information was outdated. She couldn't believe that the health officials and police wouldn't have gotten things under control by now.

Without any way to be sure, Allison let the blind settle back into place. She had to protect the children. She had to protect herself.

She still had to pee, but her feet were frozen to the spot. She was afraid to move, afraid to make any sound.

Minutes slowly passed with nothing but the frantic pounding in her head to measure them by. But as the day banished the night, visual details began to emerge. The edges of the window blinds resolved themselves from the rest of the wall. A pale line materialized beneath the door. The puddles had dried, condensing the thin mud into damp, dark streaks.

She pulled the blind away again. The person was still hunched over beneath the next window, still scratching at the sill with the patience of Job. The hand opened, stretched. The tip of one finger was a brighter shade of white, as if all hint of color had been bled away from it.

Movement further out in the quad caught Allison's eye, and she twisted around to see. Multiple shapes moved in the shadows beneath the overhangs, flitting about like ghosts. She was startled to realize that the quad was filled with people.

What are they doing out there? Why are they so quiet?

She watched one shadow disengage itself and move across the open space. Allison recognized the woman immediately.

"Rosa?" she whispered to herself, *"why aren't you in your classroom?"*

As if she heard, her colleague turned her pale face toward Allison's window. The woman stepped forward, and several more shadows followed her out onto the wet grass, shadows much smaller in stature than she.

Allison gasped and drew back. Maybe it was a trick of the poor light, but their eyes had seemed as black as coal, and their skin grayer than seemed possible. Perhaps most frightening, however, was the way that they moved. Silently, swiftly, yet unhurried. Uncoordinated, yet with purpose.

She was sure Rosa wouldn't take her students out for a walk at a quarter to six in the morning. Not during a lockdown. Nor would they remain as mute as they had unless—

They're infected.

The scratching noise shifted, edging closer to Allison's position. She held her breath until it passed, moving onto the next window, then beyond. When next she peeked out, the figure with the white—

bandaged

—finger was gone, and the courtyard was clear. All of the people—Principal Barden, Rosa, her students—had disappeared, as if the strengthening light had forced them deeper into the corners.

She stood at the window, wondering if she'd even seen them at all or if she'd only imagined them. Then, directly across from her, the main office door swung open. A man stepped out, though he kept his hand on the knob. He looked around.

"June?" His voice was little more than a whisper. *"June!"*

Allison wanted to tell him to go back inside. Instead, she watched in silence as he let go of the door and scurried over the grass toward her classroom. He made it halfway across when the first tiny shape disengaged itself from the shadows to the man's left. Soon, Peter Cundiff was surrounded. He froze with indecision.

"Go back," Allison whispered.

"Miss Mullins?" Sanja asked.

Allison shushed her. She watched in horror as the children circled the man. They drew closer, then reached out their hands to touch him. He spun around with a shriek and ran.

She could sense the moment the children changed. The words from the article flashed through her mind: *Violence has been observed in isolated cases and may be due to rapid degeneration of neurological processes.*

But it wasn't the result of some sort of mental degeneration. The change happened because he had tried to escape.

Allison forced herself to step away from the window. Her heart beat hard and fast, and her thoughts drowned in the swamp of her terror.

"Miss Mullins? Miss Mullins!"

"Yes?" she managed to whisper. "What, Sanja?"

"I'm hungry."

She found the girl's hand and numbly made her way back to the sharing mat. She could hear Rodney beginning to stir.

"I'm hungry," Sanja repeated.

Rodney sat up, pale fists rubbing chubby knuckles against a ghost face. "Me, too."

"Are our parents here yet?"

"N-not ... yet," Allison lied. She forced herself to remain calm, but her tongue kept tripping over the words. "What do you want t-to eat? We have some f-fruit and a couple different sandwiches, cookies, and—"

"Are we going to wash hands?"

"Of c-course. Silly me."

She found the bottle of sanitizer and squirted it out onto their hands, guessing at the amount.

"I wish we had light."

"It's still night. But morning's coming soon. We'll have more light to see by then."

She reached over for the box with the food and dug through it. "Decide for yourself what you want," she told them. Unable to make any sense of it, she stood up.

"Where are you going?"

Despite the terror swirling inside of her, the urge to pee had returned, stronger than before. "To use the bathroom. Okay? Find what you want and eat. Be fair and share."

The tears came in a flood as soon as the door shut behind her. It was as if all of the fear she had kept bottled up materialized, building pressure until it needed an outlet. But the purge brought only physical relief. Deep down, she still ached.

There was a soft knock at the door. "Miss Mullins?"

"I'll be right out." She wiped the tears from her eyes, dried herself, and fixed her clothes. Finally, she washed her hands in the sink.

Sanja knocked again with slightly more urgency.

Allison opened the door. The girl was a shadow. "Yes? What is it?"

"It's Rodney."

"Is he not sharing?"

"No, he's playing in the mud by the door."

Allison looked up in alarm. She could just make out the boy crouched on the threshold, smearing the tacky mud over the tiles. She watched as he reached forward, and her heart froze at the sight of what came in through the gap.

"Miss Mullins?"

Allison stepped away from the girl. "Rodney? *Rodney!* Move away from there!"

"It's his mother."

She spun around. "How do you know that, Sanja?"

"He told me. He said it was his mother."

"Don't open the door, Rodney," Allison whispered.
"Rodney, don't touch! Please don't touch!"

"He already did."

Once more an icy chill flushed through Allison's body.
"Sanja, get in the bathroom."

"Miss Mullins? What's going to hap—"

"Get in the bathroom. *Now!*"

"But—"

"Do it, Sanja. Close the door. I'll be right in."

The door shut.

"Rodney?"

The boy kept pawing at the dirt, pawing at the fingers poking through the gap. Allison could clearly see the bandage now.

"Rodney?"

The boy sat up, but Allison could not see his face.

She fumbled the phone from her pocket and tried to turn it on before remembering the battery. It took her several seconds to insert the pack. The phone vibrated and began the interminable process of booting up.

By now, Allison was halfway across the room. The light outside was growing stronger, but she still could see nothing where he crouched except for his hands and knees. His fingers seemed too pale. His nails looked too black.

It's the mud.

The phone gave a loud, unhappy chirp. The screen immediately dimmed into power-saving mode.

"Rodney?" Allison aimed the phone toward the boy and snapped a picture. In the fraction of a second that the flash lit up the room, the image of the boy seared itself into her mind, and she very nearly crumpled in a faint to the floor.

His eyes were deathly black, his lips had gone gray. His skin was ashen.

She heard him move, and she stumbled backward. The flash had blinded her, but she could sense him edging to her left, moving too quickly and quietly for a nine-year-old boy.

"Rodney?"

He hissed, and it was the same sound she had heard last night coming through the vent from Rosa's room.

She turned and ran for the bathroom door. She was keenly aware of him now, his growling, his bare feet slapping the soft carpet. Hands extended, she slammed into the door, cried out, whimpered as she clawed at the knob. And for the briefest of moments she was certain that Sanja had locked it and that she was going to become infected with the—

flense

—virus.

She could sense Rodney right behind her, bearing down, his breath on her back. At any moment, he would touch her and—

The knob twisted in her fingers. With a cry of abject terror, Allison tore the door open and pulled herself inside. She slammed it shut just as the boy rammed his body against the outside. He began to claw at the wood, growling and hissing.

Allison flicked the latch to lock it.

"Miss Mullins?" Sanja asked. She sounded scared.

"I'm okay. I'm okay, Sanja, honey." She slipped down the door, sobbing with relief. "I'm fine. We're safe."

"The space beneath the door—"

"There's no space here, Sanja. Not this door. He can't hurt us. He can't touch us."

The boy continued to scratch at the wood on the other side. But there was no way he was going to get in. Not even a fingertip.

"She was sick?" Sanja asked. "His mother was sick?"

"Yes."

"And now he's sick, too? Because he touched her fingers?"

"I told him not to," Allison replied. She frowned at the way the bathroom acoustics made the little girl's voice sound. "Why?"

"Because I touched them, too."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sometimes it feels like each generation manages to rush headlong toward some new existential threat, whether real or perceived. In 2016, we face several at once, from climatic to technological, from biological to political, social, financial, and ideological. Never before has there been a time when our world felt so small, been so fractured, and become seemingly so vulnerable.

It's easy to be pessimistic about our chances.

And yet, our generation undoubtedly has it better than any other preceding it. The world is unified against many disparate threats. New commitments to address climate change and alternative energy top the list. Even as we begin to understand our impact on this planet, we look upward to the heavens for new challenges and opportunities. Our voices are joined more loudly than ever against the scourge of terrorism and the barbaric ideologies which spawn it. International scientific collaborations fight human diseases, protect our seed stocks, create hardier varieties of food plants, and develop technologies which will accelerate our growth as a species and bring us even closer together.

We may indeed be the engine of our own demise, but we also possess the ability to drive our fate toward a brighter future as never before.

As a writer of speculative fiction, it's been my pleasure to imagine the "what if" scenarios raised by the turbulence of change, to dress them up in human flesh and endow them with compelling settings for others to contemplate. To force you to consider the possibilities beyond "what *is*."

Doomsday stories are among my favorite to tell, not because I particularly enjoy visions of global destruction, but because I consider such tales as distilleries of the human condition; they extract and amplify the best — and worst — essences of us, and in doing so, they teach us

about ourselves, about the things we hold dear, the things we most fear, and the ideals we strive to attain.

Shelter in Place is a standalone story set at the nexus joining the post-apocalyptic world of BUNKER 12 and the pre-apocalyptic world of THE FLENSE, its companion series. They are my most ambitious projects to date.

BUNKER 12 begins three years after the event known as the Flense (the day represented in microscopic scale in the story you just read). It tells the story of a young man and his friends as they emerge into a new world after prolonged isolation. They have been told that the secret to the disease — and a means to cure it — may be found within a mythical shelter known as Bunker 12.

THE FLENSE follows a troubled young reporter as she attempts to uncover the links between several seemingly disconnected disasters to hopefully head off an extinction event predicted by the prepper group sponsoring her.

While *Shelter in Place* is essentially a horror story with a dark ending, it is optimistic at its core, as it tells the tale of an ordinary person rising against extraordinary challenges. It is the story of you or me. I hope you find it intriguing enough to want to investigate further the circumstances leading up to, and following, the day of doom it describes.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

DID YOU ENJOY THE STORY?

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Shelter in Place

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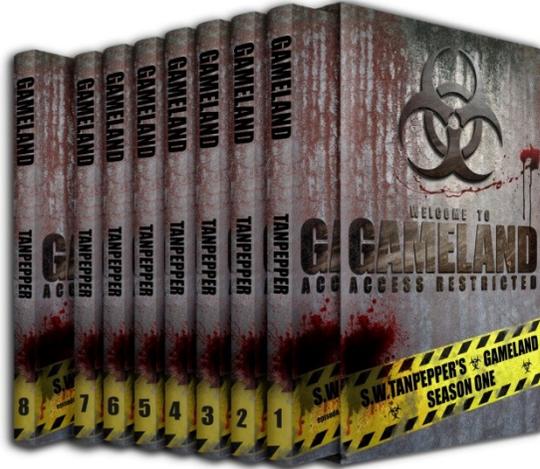
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‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saul Tanpepper is the speculative fiction pen name for Ken J. Howe, a retired PhD molecular biologist and biotech entrepreneur who writes full time in multiple genres from his home in California.

Saul is the author of the epic post-apocalyptic series GAMELAND, in which a group of young computer hackers break into a live-action virtual reality gaming arcade populated by the resurrected bodies of executed criminals.

If you prefer shorter works, check out his two story collections, *Insomnia: Paranormal Tales, Science Fiction, & Horror* and *Shorting the Undead: A Menagerie of Macabre Mini-Fiction*.

To learn more about Saul's writings and for availability, please visit his website (<http://www.tanpepperwrites.com>), where you can sign up to receive a free starter library and news of releases, exclusive pricing specials, and giveaways. Finally, if you really want to pester him, visit his Facebook page (<http://facebook.com/saul.tanpepper>) and tell him to stop wasting time writing limericks about zombies.

If you enjoyed this story in the world of BUNKER 12, then you'll want to check out the series, as well as the companion series, THE FLENS. You may also enjoy the GAMELAND series, an epic cyberpunk adventure through a post-apocalyptic world in which zombies are used as avatars in a twisted live action game for the amusement of the rich and privileged. Sign up for the [Tanpepper Tidings](#) for a free starter library. Find out more about Saul and his titles:

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by Saul Tanpepper

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