

THE
TYLLIAN
VIRUS
THE PANDEMIC SEQUENCE BOOK 1

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A PERMUTED PRESS book

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Disease is the retribution of outraged Nature.
-Hosea Ballou

CHAPTER ONE

The achingly soulful voice of Jeff Buckley roused him from sleep. Eyes barely open, the faint light of the dawn illuminated the small room enough for him locate the half-empty pack of Marlboro Lights on the nightstand. A grunt and the flick of a lighter later, Mike Allard sat up in bed. The snooze button was not an option this morning as he had scheduled a parent conference at seven. With one hand towards the ashtray and the other petting his equally tired gray terrier, the second-year teacher listened as “I Want Someone Badly,” drew to a close.

After the final note, Mike stubbed out the cigarette and tossed the covers aside to shuffle towards the bathroom for the morning ritual of a hot shower and shave. As the water quickly turned cold, he shut it off and towed dry. Frequent trips to the gym had kept the twenty-three year old in better shape than most of the guys with whom he had graduated college. Leaning closer to the fogged mirror, Mike checked the barely-there brown stubble and opted to leave the scruff for the day. The high school had a “casual” policy allowing the staff to wear jeans, so in a way, he felt the scruff went not only with his attire but also his mood.

Gazelle, now fully awake, stood at the back door waiting for her morning walk. He could not help but laugh when the dog danced in a chaotic circle once he attached her collar. The morning was crisp as the two stepped out into the

backyard, the leash extending to its full sixteen feet. Gazelle dashed to her area and did her business and within minutes, Mike had given the dog a treat, locked up the house, and revved the engine in his truck.

Tennessee spring was beginning and the temperature was forgiving if one did not have time to warm up his vehicle. The drive to work was a short one through a few back country roads. He parked, taking one last drag on another cigarette, popped two pieces of gum into his mouth and headed into the building.

The rural high school looked rather uninviting to most outsiders. With its gray pod structures, the facility bore more of a resemblance to a nuclear fallout shelter than an institution of education. And a rather rundown shelter, at that. The roofs had several areas of rust, which provided the only splash of color. The growth of any flowers and grass still lagged behind the calendar. Mike hustled past the gray columns with their chipping paint and entered the main office.

"Morning, Mike, you're here early," greeted the school's aging receptionist. Much like the school, Mrs. Holigan had seen better days. But, also like the high school, she was an institution not only in the building, but in the small farming community as well.

"Yeah, parent conference this morning."

"The conference room should be unlocked. Are y'all going to want some bottles of water?"

Mrs. Holigan, whose children and grandchildren had long since graduated from John Moore High School, had essentially adopted not only the students, but also the staff as her own. As Mike was about to reply that he would grab them, Mrs. Holigan answered the ringing phone.

"Good morning, John Moore High School. How can I help you?"

Mike went to the rear of the office to check his mailbox and pour himself a cup of the receptionist's famous coffee. Most faculty members went through several cups of it by the

time the dismissal bell sounded at 3:00 PM. Not wanting to take away from the flavor, Mike skipped the milk and sugar and returned to the front desk where Mrs. Holigan was wrapping up the call.

“Okay, darling, you tell him to feel better and don’t worry about a thing. You just take care of that boy. Something sure is going around. I had to use up my entire substitute list to cover teachers today. If you need us to send work home, let us know. Okay. Take care now. God bless.”

Mike smiled behind his coffee mug. In an overly politically correct field like education, a school official ending a call with a blessing would have been frowned upon. But with Mrs. Holigan it came out as natural as one says “hello” and “goodbye” and everyone ignored her little rule breaking.

As she hung up the phone, she turned to him saying, “Well, darling, looks like you got in early for nothing. That was Maybelline Turner, Stacy’s momma, and she says that Stacy came down with an awful high fever last night and they won’t be able to make it in for your meeting.”

Actually, it was not *his* meeting at all. Stacy’s mother had asked for the meeting to discuss one of her daughter’s test grades. Normally, Mike would have been able to take care of that over the phone, but Maybelline Turner was one of those “helicopter” parents – a bit too involved in her child’s education. A week did not go by that there was not an email or voicemail from her. Still, in an age of declining parental involvement, Mike Allard indulged her.

With an unspoken expletive for the unnecessary early arrival, he thanked Mrs. Holigan for the message and headed to his classroom in the history pod.

The interior of the school was only a slight improvement from its exterior. Most of the lockers bore the dents and scratches that came from decades of overuse. The ceiling tiles were stained with water from the leaking roofs. At the beginning of each school year, many teachers pooled money together to buy paint for the walls of their respective pods. It

was perhaps the only improvement the school had seen in over thirty years. Many petitioned the school board to improve or even repair the school. Yet, whenever the time came to pass a tax increase to cover the costs, the initiative always received a resounding defeat.

Mike's room, Room 15A (though there was no 15B) was one of five classrooms in the pod. He flipped on the lights, walked over to his desk and sat down. The room was not large, but likewise did not feel cramped. With the pod structure, classrooms were shaped like a Trivial Pursuit wedge, with one end significantly wider than its opposite side. Thanks to the night custodians, the thirty-five desks were arranged in seven neat rows. Mike kept his desk off to one side, as he preferred to lecture from a podium and stool.

With an hour to kill before first period European History, Mike decided to get ahead on lesson plans and catch up on grading. He enjoyed teaching. He enjoyed working with students and sharing his expertise in history. However, he hated grading papers, exams, and quizzes, etc. To that end, he planned as few of them each semester as his principal would allow. The old guard of teachers frowned upon his grading methods. But he was fresh out of college and only in his second year of teaching. He preferred to employ new tactics, which to him seemed to capture the interests of his students more than the dusty methods of previous years.

The hour slipped by quickly and he could hear the steady increase of teen voices roaming the halls, lockers opening and closing, cell phones ringing, and the other usual sounds of the school coming to life.

"Mr. Allard," came the soft voice of Michelle Lafkin, a junior from his fifth period American History II class. She was the type of student every teacher dreamed of: studious, engaging, genuinely interested in learning, and not the least bit pretentious. She came from an impoverished home where the mom had long since run out, leaving Michelle's father to raise her and her two younger brothers. She had the intelligence that all but guaranteed a full-ride scholarship to

college, which would be the only way she could afford a post-secondary degree.

“Good morning, Michelle. What’s up?” Mike replied, happy to turn away from the barely decreased stack of ungraded work.

“Well, I was wondering if there was any way you could give me the assignments for the next few days? My brothers have the flu, and my dad can’t afford to take any more time off work, so I’m going to have to stay home with them for a bit.”

It was a very unusual request from Michelle. Since Mike had been teaching at John Moore, she was known to have one of the best attendance records. He normally was not a fan of the “take-out” style of education for absentees, but Mike knew that if this particular student made the request, the need must be genuine.

“Sure. Let me run and make copies of my notes and the worksheets for the next few days. It should only take a minute.”

“Thanks. My dad’s waiting in the car. I’ll just tell him I’ll be out in a bit.”

As the petite blonde hurried out of the room and towards the exit, Mike gathered his notes binder and made his way to the copy room.

As he approached the room, Mike thought he was in luck as the usual line of teachers making last-minute copies was nowhere to be seen. The spreading smile just as quickly faded when he saw why there were no teachers waiting for the copier.

Copier Out of Order stated the hand-written sign taped to the top of the ancient machine. Unlike some teachers, Mike had not gotten in the habit of making copies at local office stores due to the copier’s fickle operational status.

“Son of a bitch,” he exhaled through gritted teeth, and returned to his room to find Michelle waiting.

“Bad news...the copier’s out again. But, how about this? After school I’ll make some copies at the library and drop

them off at your house?" Mike offered.

Either out of embarrassment of her low-income home, or not wanting to have her teacher go out of his way, Michelle politely refused.

"No, you don't have to do that, Mr. Allard. I can just catch up when I get back to school."

"Nonsense. I pass your neighborhood on the way home. Besides, I owe your dad for the work he did on my truck. I'll be there around five this evening."

One of the benefits of teaching in a small, blue-collar town is the willingness of parents to offer their trade skills at ridiculously low prices. In this instance, Mr. Lafkin had repaired Mike's muffler free of charge. Dropping off school work was the least he could do to return the mechanic's kindness.

Beaming with gratitude, Michelle thanked her history teacher and rushed back out to her waiting father. As he turned back to his desk, the five-minute bell sounded through the halls.

Students began shuffling in, chattering about whatever Monday night television they had watched the evening before. The majority of the girls in this sophomore class were all too serious in their discussion of which woman had been given a rose and which had been sent away by the reality star du jour.

Though not much older than his students, Mike shook his head and smiled with amusement. *If only they could get into World War II the same way*, he thought. With a knack of tying popular culture into his lessons, his amusement grew as he began picturing a scenario in which Chamberlain hands a rose to Hitler to explain appeasement.

The late bell rang and the students took their seats. It always amazed Mike that students chose to sit in the same seats day after day, yet they would have balked if he assigned them seats. He greeted the class and began to take roll.

After sending the office his list of absentees—four in

total—Mike continued his lecture notes on the Treaty of Versailles from the day before. For the next forty-five minutes, the class scribbled away in their notebooks. All too soon the bell rang and the students dispersed, quickly replaced by his second period World History class. The day rolled on, and the end of fourth period came quickly, which meant Mike had a lunch period to recharge before the final two classes of the day.

Opting not to trust his luck with the cafeteria's culinary creations, Mike instead raided the vending machine in the teachers lounge. Today, unlike most days, the faces in the room belonged mostly to strangers. Mrs. Holigan had indeed had to call in back-up substitute teachers. Easing into one of the cushioned chairs around the conference-style table, he took in the lunchtime conversation.

"I just hope my kids don't end up catching it. My husband just got over the flu. Last thing we need is another round of it."

"Oh, I know! I heard at the middle school there was one class with only five kids."

"I haven't had a full class all day. Of course, all the delinquents managed to show up."

This from the security guard turned substitute, who clearly disliked most teenagers, yet eagerly accepted any call to sub. As the conversation dragged on with teachers comparing class absences, Mike nodded and mumbled agreements in between bites of his strawberry Pop Tart and thought about his own classes. Yes, there were kids out sick, or claiming they were sick, but he usually had a few out each day. Third period was the only class that really stood out with eight kids absent. From the Northeast originally, Mike noticed that when the flu struck down South, it struck hard.

Spring break was next week, and he hoped he would not get sick. He had not been home to see his family since Christmas and was eagerly looking forward to the mini-vacation. With lunch almost at an end, Mike headed back to

his classroom for the last two periods of the day.

* * *

Making the copies of his notes took less time than expected, and Mike was in his truck heading to the Lafkins. Michelle's home was in a small, make-shift trailer park on a back road off the main thoroughfare. The five or six trailers that made up the park were placed close together and were connected by clothes lines. On most days, the view out of the brown-stained windows of the trailers was the dripping laundry of a neighbor.

Mike pulled into the gravel lot and parked in front of Michelle's home. A minute or so after tapping on the screen door, a tearful Michelle appeared.

"Hi, Mr. Allard," she said with a muffled voice.

"Michelle, what's wrong?"

Stepping out onto the small landing at the top of the steps, the tired looking girl explained that her dad had taken one of her brothers, the younger one, to the hospital because his fever was quite high. She was home watching her other brother, who also seemed to be getting worse. A voice behind him interrupted Mike as he was about to offer help.

"Excuse me, can I help you?" asked a graying woman, in what looked to be her mid-fifties.

"Grandma, this is my teacher, Mr. Allard. He's dropping off some work for me since I missed school today."

With a kind smile, she said, "Not enough teachers like you these days...making house calls."

"It's on my way home, and Michelle is one of my star students. She told me about her brother. Is everything all right?" Mike asked.

The older woman's face faltered slightly with the question, the concern was clear in her eyes, and he could hear the lie behind her words. "Ryan should be fine. They just had to get that fever down."

After another minute or two of small talk, and an offer of

help should they need it, he was back in his truck on his way home. He felt sorry for Michelle and her family. They had so little and he knew that a hospital visit was going to be very costly for them. The girl had all the potential in the world, but it seemed like the world was working against her. He smoked another cigarette while the truck sat in his driveway.

Gazelle was, as always, bouncing with excitement when he walked in the door. After feeding and walking her, Mike sat on the couch and began to flip through the channels. His appetite had waned during the ride home from the Lafkins. With nothing else of interest on, Mike settled for the local evening news.

...to Vanessa Mitchell with more. Good evening, Vanessa.

Good evening, Chris. I'm here at Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville, where administrators say they saw a surge in emergency room visits today from people complaining of the same flu-like symptoms. One doctor I spoke with said it is unusual for the flu to strike this widely, this late in the season. Across town at Methodist Hospital, the staff says they are facing the same crisis.

Vanessa, we have information coming in from our affiliates across the country with similar reports. Are you able to confirm that a flu outbreak is occurring in the middle Tennessee area?

Yes, Chris. A source at the Tennessee Department of Health confirmed to me that several cities across the country are scrambling to accommodate a veritable flood of emergency room patients.

All due to the flu?

Yes, patients are reporting symptoms which are concurrent with the flu. This is Vanessa Mitchell live from Vanderbilt Hospital. Back to you, Chris.

Thank you, Vanessa. That is certainly a story we will be keeping an eye on. Up next, how to protect your family from germs.

As a commercial began to play, Mike flipped over to one of the cable news channels:

...from London and Rome with similar increases in flu cases.

To another:

...has said it is rare for the flu to spread globally with such speed.

And to another:

...already with more cases than the avian and swine flu combined.

Mike's appetite did not return that night, nor in the early hours of Wednesday, as he sat glued to the television screen. Each hour passed with less and less actual new news. Most reports just repeated another; cities across the globe reported massive cases of the flu. It was during the 3:00 AM newscast, however, that something new was announced. The flu now had a name:

The Tilian Virus.