

The Cure

By Kristina Villarini

Prologue

I don't know if you can ever live... Until you know that one day, you won't.

These were dark times, indeed. Coffee-chugging, build a panic room in your apartment out of old tuna cans and cinder blocks left on the side of the road, kind of times. I hope this letter reaches you... Or someone. Someone alive. Someone safe. Someone that can help us. Maybe you don't know what's going on. Maybe I'm going too fast. I'm a fool for thinking that everyone knows what's happening outside of these two cities. The government said it's an "isolated incident." They don't want the problem, the responsibility.

But it's not their children ripping each others flesh off and eating it with a suckworthy side of fresh human bone marrow. Not yet, at least.

When the rumors began that the United States of America in 2012, had created the "cure for death," no one could believe it. "The Americans? They aren't THAT smart," the world whispered in awe. Then the reality set in. I mean, after all, we ARE America. "They will keep this to themselves! They will use it as a weapon, like everything they create!"

Wherever this letter reaches you, believe me, we know what you think, and most of us agree. That is us, the 'weaponize or bust' Americans. The backlash was incredible. There was the customary public outcry. Religious leaders met with government officials, while science and the modern man rejoiced. Who would be cured first? Briefly rifling through my menial knowledge of American history, I realized I didn't personally have anyone worth resurrecting. If we couldn't get John Lennon, Jeff Buckley, J.F.K. or Martin Luther King, Jr., I really wasn't interested.

It was hard to believe, even for me, a freelance writer. Most times I make shit up in my job, but I still couldn't quite believe this. I called other, more reputable journalists and this news evoked the inner-ebonics/pop-culture professor in all of them. "This shit can't be legit," was pretty much the general consensus. Around the world, the announcement was probably met

with a resounding, incredibly English-sounding "Really?" But, it was real. This was real life and apparently, I was living in a time where people could face their demons, and win.

The "death cure" was here. Clinical trials were promising, like all "cures" initially, but this was supposed to be different. This thing got the green light so fast. It zipped through so many of the normally flaming and complex FDA-created hoops. This was the U.S.A.'s new beginning. The possibilities were endless, much like the fear, except the fear was more paralyzing. This was supposed to be a collective victory, as a species. Our proverbial living time-capsule, because in our perfect little world, none of us would be dead, ever. This was supposed to be the unifying occurrence the world needed to put down their nuclear arms and hug their nuclear family.

Not rip each other's faces off.

When the rich began lining up to fly to space, people didn't know what to say. What's worse, the disparity between rich and poor, or between the people who want to go to space and those who don't give a crap about space?

I watched it all and waited. Send in the clowns in lab coats, and the drama. I waited for something new to write. It was the biggest story in the world, and the news provided me with endless work. The interviews with experts on cloning, aging and regeneration. Experts on aging? At the sound of that title, I immediately scoffed and imagined Joan Rivers teaching me how to smile with my eyes. My inbox wouldn't stop churning out assignments and invitations to events no one had ever wanted me at before. They weren't enough writers in the world, let alone good ones. My cell phone wouldn't stop ringing. Maybe I could actually pay some bills because of this thing.

When the first person, a really (dead) human got up and looked around, groggily but familiar, without what one could say was a "soul," I was in the room above, watching through the glass ceiling. The other journalists gasped, some doubted. I fell silent, suddenly consumed by the feeling of some serious spew-action rising through my insides, burning my throat. That sandwich I ate wanted to be resurrected too, it seemed. Watching this play out, was like the eerie feeling you get at a funeral,

looking at the embalmed, swollen shell of your friend or loved one, when you have that period where you wonder where they are now. This was that weird, false moment of altered reality where you imagine them getting out of that pine box saying to everyone, "I just punk'd all of you fuckers!"

Except it wasn't a joke. I was watching that shell. Right before my eyes was someone's mother, someone's daughter, back from wherever they were. Back from paradise—if that's possible, to return to their crooked shells, unable to speak or recognize. And this was the breakthrough. The miracle.

There had to be more testing of course, to improve the "restoration" process, they said. The fact was that no one quite knew how to return these unlucky saps to their natural, functioning state. They were currently working on medication that could restore their organs to their normal, collaborative purposes. Doctors weren't sure if they could even hear yet, so speech development was a stretch. Nothing had been developed to actually help these people yet. We were all on a plane with no fuel, waiting to fly. We didn't know what they knew or remembered. What a fucking world to live in: once the doctors actually brought someone back from the dead, they didn't know what to do with them.

Of course, no one wanted to hear any of this. A little TLC will get grandma back to normal, good as new! It was just the trauma. Imagine what we can learn about the afterlife! People wanted to run "test-drives" at home. After much debate, one person had been granted, under strict supervision, the opportunity to take their loved one home. He was Charlie and his dead wife was the Wonka factory. What a sick notion. This person, a woman, a wife, he had a home once. She died of a freak brain aneurism within the previous six months. She was healthy, fertile and happy, the perfect candidate for this grotesque adult-science fair.

Her name was Stella Welsh, but her experimental codename, according to my sources, was "Avenger." Later, when things started getting fucked, we called her the "Toxic Avenger." Apparently, one of the docs was a big comic book nerd and wanted to name her Black Widow, but the team settled on something more

patriotic, just in case the name got leaked. Stella's husband is an attorney, and interestingly enough, he was named Charlie. We met in a motel outside of upstate New York. He explained to me that he wasn't really thinking clearly when he signed the papers handing her body to the government. He said he didn't read them. This gives me hope for attorneys everywhere. Reviewing the paperwork, I could see the shadowy remnants of tear stains, smudges wetting the ink on his signature. He was a lost pawn on a very empty chess board. He was nothing without his queen.

When I spoke to him, he surprised me with his emotion. His voice was a cocktail in a dirty glass of hope and dismay. He had the wide eyes of a lost child in the Mall of America. He said he lost thirty pounds since Stella died. When I asked him about work, he said he hadn't work sixteen hour days since he was trying to become a partner at his firm so that they could put enough money away to start a family and she would never have to work. Stella wanted to write books and when they got married he promised her he'd make all her dreams come true. Charlie was noble, in a sincere, defeated way. He had the same soul-less air about him I'd watched through that glass ceiling. His life with her, their picture-perfect life was all he knew. After she passed, he came home to sleep and would pray to the "evil deities that took the love of my life for death." There was no in-between, "I couldn't live, not without her."

I recorded him talking about the day Stella came home. I wish I could attach the recording, but there isn't time. I transcribed what I could and copied it here. If you really want to know just how fucked we are, read this. And then read it again. Then get help, if you have time. But trust no one, whoever you are, and hide.

"It was Christmas morning. No, it was the countdown to Christmas morning. For the weeks leading up to her coming home, I started cleaning again. I went to the gym and ran miles. I shaved. I should have been happy, but my heart was so fucking heavy. I wondered if I took her from heaven to return her to a world she didn't belong to. Sometimes I imagined myself as Dante, traversing the Inferno to retrieve my great love and restore my faith in the world. I wondered what I was bringing her back to?

Did I sign away the person I loved most, to have her returned to a husband that she didn't belong to anymore? I looked up the legal precedent. I didn't even know if I was even still her husband. We were--technically, are, widows. I opened her mail for the first time. I hadn't really known how to settle her affairs. What the fuck was there to settle? She was gone, and I never planned on her coming back. I was so scared. Anxious. I threw up a lot. I thought she might not recognize me.

When they delivered her, I placed her in her favorite position on the couch. I kissed her all over. I held her. I sounds like a pussy, but I mean, I cried for hours. What could I do? Her hands were so cold. When I asked the two doctors who had to stay with her, they told me it would take some time before she would generate normal amounts of heat, again, if ever. She looked around sometimes. Her eyes were the prettiest shade of green, olive. I hate to say it, but when I looked at them, they were dead. She struggled to move. She made noises. Hums, grunts. It was almost like an infant in an adult's body. The smell... Our house smelled like a funeral parlor. It was a nightmare come true. A nightmare I signed up for."

Charles, can you tell me when you started noticing something was wrong?

"I always knew something was wrong. Even with all the noisemakers on the news, I never even considered Stella would be the first or second one. I couldn't bear the thought of all of these scientists poking and prodding her, but to hear her voice--she used to sing, my own fucking selfishness consumed me. One day the doctors went to take samples, and when they touched her, they whispered to each other. They never said a goddamned word to me, but things weren't going well.

When I asked them to help me get some groceries for the house out of the car, since they were, you know, staying with me--us, I guess. I went through their folders, the notes didn't make sense to me, but they noted that she was unresponsive. That her body temperature was actually dropping. I kept thinking she was suffering worse than when she was in the hospital. I was so unsure of everything but I knew I had to hope. What the fuck was the other option?"

Can you tell me about the bathroom incident?

"Yeah. I mean, I want people to know—what we're up against. What the fuck we've created. I went to brush my teeth, like normal, and the docs used to wash her every day, there was a female nurse that came sometimes to help. One day I looked in the tub and saw a clump of Stella's hair. When I reached my fingers in to pull it out of the drain, I could feel something heavy attached in between my fingers. When I finally got it out... Fuck, man..."

Charlie, what did you see?

"It was a piece of her scalp. A chunk of her flesh. The follicles still attached to this reddened piece of meat in my hands. The meat of my wife's beautiful head. Like it just fucking fell off her. She was literally falling apart. I panicked and I tossed it in the toilet. I needed answers. But it was too fucking late."

Why?

"I heard a noise. It sounded like someone threw a bag of potatoes against the wall. I heard screaming. My first instinct, you know, was to open the door and face whoever obviously broke into my house. I was worried for me, Stella, the doctors. But, then I stopped being worried and got really scared. No one broke into the house. The problem was already there.

I shut off the light and opened the door gently, jut enough to look out. Hand prints, blood against the hallway walls. My eyes felt like they were burning. The house smelled like rotting everything. Like death. Death was in my house. I crawled into the hall, and I saw the shoes of one of the doctors. They were laid out. In Stella's room."

At this point Charlie began to cry. I shut off the tape recorder. We had an argument about the story, and how much he could say. A few days passed before I convinced him to at least, tell the world, something.

"Okay, okay. If I am going to tell the world something, I'm going to tell them that this isn't a miracle cure. We played God and we lost. My wife, she threw the nurse against the wall. She

squeezed Miller's throat until she crushed everything inside of it. And she used Smith's head as a cereal bowl while she ate his fucking brains. I found this in my house. And she left, and I took off. That was the last time I saw her, or really anything else. The memories are burned into me, I can't see anything anymore. Just the destruction and the murder of people I caused because I was so stupid. Death is inescapable and now we've brought back the people who experienced it to show it to us in the most painful ways possible. How do you stop this? The Army can't do anything. Shoot them? They're fucking dead.

We're all fucking dead."

I hope this letter find someone. Someone who can help us.

If I'm still alive, you can find me at the St. Patrick's Cathedral every Wednesday at 4pm.

My name is Jacqueline Morris, and I don't want to write or hide anymore.