

THE DARKNESS FROM INSIDE

by

DAMOND FUDGE

Clark Grell woke up at 1:37 a.m. but, if he was being honest with himself, he hadn't really been sleeping. His night had been fitful, at best. When he climbed into bed earlier, he'd thought nothing of the slight ache on the left side of his nose.

He first noticed that redness which usually signaled an oncoming pimple yesterday morning when he was smearing on the shaving lotion. He poked at it a little, feeling the familiar dull throb deep within the pore. After his shower, he dabbed some acne cream on it, hoping he could kill it before it grew.

A cursory examination when he took out his contacts that night revealed his preemptive strike had been unsuccessful. It was even redder, now, and a sizeable lump had formed. He wasn't certain, but he thought he could feel some heat coming from it, as well. He rubbed more medication on it just before going to bed.

All night long, Clark knew exactly when he had rolled over onto his left side. The pain from his nose would instantly pull him out of his slumber. He finally had enough, throwing the covers off in frustration and swinging his legs out and onto the floor. He sat on the edge of the bed, taking deep breaths in order to calm his heart rate.

Once relaxed, he gingerly touched the bump on his nose. He'd barely brushed it, yet a sharp electricity shot up through his sinuses, aimed straight at his temple, followed quickly by a searing hot flash, as if he'd touched a lit match to his nostril. He screamed. Darkness closed in around his sight, but he was able to keep himself from completely blacking out at the last second.

He stood, yet immediately sat back down when the world began spinning faster than he'd ever seen it do before. Five different versions of his room kaleidoscoped around each other. He closed his eyes as he forced the nausea and spinning to stop.

It took several minutes.

Once he felt not only fully composed but actually able to do so, he stood again and made his way to the bathroom. Slowly. The lights stung and it took a few seconds for him to focus. He leaned in as close as he could to the mirror, and quickly wished he hadn't.

Most of the entire left side of his nose was a shade of red he'd only ever seen in conjunction with severe sunburns. In the center of this was a mound. While he was no stranger to pimples, he'd never seen one on his nose either this big or this color. The ball bearing-sized cyst had a pitch black center surrounded by a brownish yellow that appeared to be getting darker as he stared at it, swirling under the skin as its hue changed. He knew what needed to be done and, from the looks, this thing was about to make one hell of a mess.

He knelt down next to the toilet. Clark steeled himself, his right thumb and index finger hovering on either side of the blackening sac. He took a few deep breaths, the smell of stale urine filling his nostrils and causing his stomach to churn. This momentary gastric distraction was just what he needed. His fingers acted on autopilot and squeezed.

The blackout was instantaneous. His body collapsed, stopped from completely ending up on the floor by the toilet seat. When he finally woke, the throbbing in his head was keeping time with his nose. He kept his head in place, the cool lid slowly easing his pain. As the fog lifted, he started to notice the sound.

At first he thought he might have accidentally hit the flush handle, but he soon recognized it as the sound of liquids mixing together. Suddenly, the smell hit his nose. There had been times in his life when he described something rancid as “smelling like death,” but this was the first time when it was literally true. Bile rose up to the back of his throat, and it was all he could do to keep it from going any further. That was when he felt the flow.

Whatever was pouring into the toilet was coming from him. He brought his hand to his face and found what felt, to his fingertips, like a deluge. The fluid was coming from the fissure where the cyst had been, and it felt oddly thick and sticky. He raised his hand to his line of sight. The fingertips were coated with a black substance that looked like watered down tar.

The flow didn't feel like it was going to stop. Clark struggled to reposition himself on his knees, keeping his head over the bowl. He reached above his head, grabbed the bath towel, wadded up one corner and pressed it against his face. It took a great deal of balancing skill to get upright, but he eventually succeeded. His head was still throbbing and his sight, from the one eye not covered by off-white cotton, was spinning, but he was able to make it over to the sink.

Against his better judgement he decided to check out the damage. He leaned over the sink, getting close enough to the mirror where his fuzzy sight was clearer. Deep down Clark really didn't want to see whatever ghastly horror his nose had become but, knowing it was inevitable, he braced himself for the worst and pulled the towel from his face.

What he saw would be forever burned into his mind.

The cloth momentarily stuck to the wound, leaving a few strands of cotton behind when it came free. Most of the mound was gone, though a bit of its base remained. Where the black ball bearing had been was now a ragged flesh-hole. The skin around the edge was curling up exactly like burning paper, tiny droplets of blood spotting all along it as if they were afraid to get any bigger and drip from their perches.

The black fluid poured from the gash like a demonic waterfall, rolling down his cheek, diverted through his stubble until it fell from his jaw about a quarter inch back from his chin. He couldn't believe what he was witnessing and it took a great deal of mental effort to pull himself out of this stunned daze. Clark wadded the entire towel into a big ball and pressed it to his face. He needed to get to the emergency room. Now! He grabbed his car keys from the top of the dresser and ran from his apartment, barefoot and dressed in only pajama bottoms.

* * *

It was a relatively quiet night in the emergency room, as the Wednesday night/Thursday morning shift tended to be. The most excitement, so far, came from the young mother-to-be in Room 2, but her labor had slowed over the past hour. She was munching ice chips like they were going out of style, and her husband had gone to the machine six times, already. The two nurses on duty joked that you could almost set your watch by him. "There he goes. Ten minutes must have passed."

Room 1 was currently occupied by a quickly-sobering frat guy and his two brothers. Dr. Jenkins was in the process of setting the broken arm the one had sustained when he fell from the deck at their house chasing an errant beer pong ball. In their drunken panic and confusion, his brothers had carried him in like they were moving a wounded soldier: One holding him by the armpits, the other with his arms crooked around the knees. Some nights were more amusing than others.

Nurse Manning, the younger of the two at the check-in desk, looked up with little interest when she saw headlights appear at the far end of the lot. "Here comes another," she said to Nurse Franklin, returning to her paperback romance as she spoke.

"It's a regular Grand Central in here, tonight," Nurse Franklin said, laughing at herself as she pulled up the admittance form on her computer. She sat upright and put on her best welcoming grin, but the smile quickly faded when she saw how fast the car was coming at the building. She meant to just tap the younger nurse's shoulder, but her arm shot out with such speed that it turned into more of a punch.

Nurse Manning cried out in pain, "What the hell?!" Then she saw it, too. She was out of her chair in a flash, running back to Room 1. She burst through the door, startling everyone inside. "Doctor, we have something coming in, and their driving fast."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Almost done here."

The car outside left nearly fifteen feet of rubber on the pavement as its brakes and tires screamed in chorus. The driver stumbled out of the vehicle and left the car door open and the engine running as he struggled to make it to the entrance. Nurse Franklin saw he was holding a

wad of something against his face. She steeled herself for something nasty, like a gunshot or stabbing.

The automatic doors had barely opened when Clark pushed through, knocking him off balance when his right shoulder smacked into them. Despite his weakened state, he kept himself upright. During the drive his vision had begun to blur and he was getting light-headed. His feet felt simultaneously heavy as bricks and floppy as dead fish. He staggered up to the admittance desk and grabbed onto it as if it was the only thing keeping him from falling off the planet.

The man was practically naked, which Nurse Franklin found more amusing than the way the frat boys had carried their friend. The bath towel covered most of his face, and it muffled his words when he first spoke to her. “Sorry,” she said, motioning for him to move the towel. “Could you repeat that, Sir?”

He pushed some of the cloth out of the way. “Something’s leaking from my face,” Clark said again.

“Let’s get you back to a room, Hon.” She motioned for him to come around the desk, and guided him through the double door entrance to the examination rooms. As they rushed back to Room 3, Nurse Franklin’s attention was drawn to the odd odor. This close to the man she could smell it. Just a whiff of human rot. Nurse Manning was prepping the room as they entered. Nurse Franklin guided the patient to exam table and said, “Nurse Manning will take care of you from here.” She left the room and hurried to Room 1 to get the doctor, subconsciously rubbing her own nose.

The young nurse turned to face the man and said, “What seems to be the problem?”

“Something’s leaking from my face.”

“What, exactly? Blood? Pus?”

“I don’t know. Something...black.”

That wasn’t an answer the nurse normally heard. “OK,” she said, addressing a computer on a rolling stand near her, “let me get some information first. Name?”

“Clark Grell.”

As the young nurse typed, she noticed her hands were shaking. She had just celebrated her fifth anniversary on the job. There had been ice cream cake in the break room and the other nurses chipped in to get her a nice purse because the strap broke on her old one just a week prior. Over those years, she’d seen some pretty grotesque things (twelve fence post impalements and counting). Yet, why was she so bothered by what this man just said? “Date of birth?”

Before Clark could answer, Dr. Jenkins entered. He was in the process of putting on the second latex glove as he walked. “Hello there...” he paused to glance at the computer screen, “...Clark. I’m Dr. Jenkins.” He began to reach for the towel. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Something’s leaking from me.”

Dr. Jenkins stopped his motion and let his arms drop to his sides. “Are you bleeding, is that what you mean?”

Clark vigorously shook his head, which caused wave of dizziness to wash over him. He reached out with his free arm to steady himself, and the doctor put his hand on Clark’s shoulder to help.

“No,” Clark finally managed after the spinning slowed. “It’s black.”

Dr. Jenkins leaned in to get a better look at the towel. He could see its coloring went from cream to light grey, and it got darker the closer it was to Clark's nose. In the right light, a large amount of blood could appear black, but this was something different. This was not natural, so far as he could tell. The slight rotten odor wasn't helping, either. His first thought was necrotizing fasciitis, more commonly called "Flesh-eating Bacteria." He'd seen a couple cases during one of his stints with Doctors without Borders, but he'd never heard of it liquefying to the point of "leaking" from somebody.

Something deep inside his mind also noted the slight emaciated look to the patient, but it was only a germ of a thought and it never formed into anything fully conscious.

"Alright, let's take a look," Dr. Jenkins said. He brought up a hand to help Clark remove the towel. When some of it stuck to Clark's face, he whispered, "Careful," as he gingerly pulled it from the man's skin.

Before the towel was completely free from Clark's face, the stench filled the room in an almost violent fashion. Nurse Manning barely turned her head away from the pair before the vomit exploded from her mouth and all over the computer. Dr. Jenkins was somehow able to control his gag reflex, but he still had to re-swallow some that had come back up.

The instant the cloth detached from Clark's face the black fluid was free to flow, and it was stronger than it had been at his home. It splashed off the towel and onto the floor, making Dr. Jenkins hop backward to avoid getting any on himself. The physician turned around to grab the waste can, only to find to find young Nurse Manning bent over it, clutching the sides so tight her hands were sheet white.

“Maybe you should step outside for a moment, Nurse,” he said as gently as he could.

“Compose yourself.”

The young woman nodded and let him take the can from her grasp. She grabbed a couple paper towels before she pushed through the door. *This is so embarrassing*, she thought as she wiped her face. She made her way to the small cleaning supplies cabinet, hoping someone hadn’t accidentally locked it, again. Almost twice a week, somebody would bump the button on the knob. She lucked out and started collecting what she needed to mop up that poor man’s mess.

The blood curdling scream, cut abruptly short, made her drop everything.

She ran back to Room 3 and threw open the door. Her entire body froze when her mind failed to grasp exactly what she was witnessing.

What had only moments ago been Clark Grell was now a shriveled, wrinkled wad of human skin and hair, loosely covered by his clothing. Dr. Jenkins was sitting on the floor, his back against the cabinets. A black fluid completely covered his lower body, and was flowing up his chest and into his mouth. His eyes pleaded to Nurse Manning for help. He reached toward her and made a grotesque gurgling sound.

At that moment, his face lost all solidity, collapsing in stages. First his lower jaw buckled right down the middle, the two sides folding together. His right cheek imploded next, followed closely by the left. Unlike the rest of the face, his eyes began to expand outward, the whites darkening to a deep grey before they burst, opening an exit for the fluid.

The scream that had been trapped just at the back of the young nurse’s throat broke free. A large portion of the black fluid rose up from the doctor’s body, like a hound hearing a pheasant rustling in a bush. A tendril shot toward Nurse Manning with blinding speed, wrapping around

her neck and choking her into silence. She dropped to her knees, hitting the linoleum hard enough to crack her left kneecap.

Finished with Dr. Jenkins, the rest of the fluid slid easily to its next victim. The original tendril remained around her throat, snaking around and around while the tip found its way into her mouth and down into her body. Every organ, every bone, every vein, every nerve it touched it dissolved, adding more and more to its own mass.

The expectant father and Broken Arm's two buddies had stepped into the hall to investigate the scream. They watched in horror as the nurse was consumed. If her body hadn't been mostly concealed by the fluid, they would've seen it crumple as if the oozing entity was wadding a piece of paper. The father darted back into his wife's room and slammed the door. The two fraternity brothers turned and ran for the exit. One of the boys made it.

The door slam had alerted the fluid to their presence. It reached out and caught the ankle of the slower boy. He fell forward, his nose exploding and five of his teeth shattering on impact. He desperately clawed at the floor as he was pulled toward the mass of blackness. One of his fingernails caught the edge of a floor tile. He was being pulled at such a fast speed that the nail snapped, half of it tearing away, exposing the soft, raw, ragged flesh to the air conditioned elements.

The sight of the college kid sprinting to the exit right after hearing Nurse Manning's scream brought Nurse Franklin to the doorway. Just the glimpse of a human body being devoured by some sort of black liquid and her instincts kicked into high gear. She used the tiny metal hammer to smash the glass over the red button next to the door jamb. The instant she

pushed the button any entrance into the exam room area sealed airtight, designed in case of a viral outbreak, trapping the rest of the poor, unfortunate souls inside.

The frat boy with the broken arm thought he heard a scream, but it was hard to tell through both the alcohol still in his system and the delirium from his pain.

The expectant father pressed his body against the door. The fear on his face scared his wife, who asked, “What’s going on? What was that scream?” Her husband couldn’t find the words, he simply shook his head. He checked the door for a lock. Finding none, he grabbed a chair to jam under the handle, but the back was too short.

And the effort was too late.

The ooze slid under the door, lapping at the man’s shoes. He jumped back, scrambling to his pregnant wife’s side. Helpless, he crawled into bed next to her and they wrapped their arms around each other. There they lay, cheek to cheek, their tears merging, when the black fluid began to feast. The substance even registered something akin to surprise when it discovered an unexpected extra morsel tucked inside the one.

Nurse Franklin knew exactly who was calling her. The emergency button not only sealed off the wing, it also set off an alarm in the security office. Mario was on duty tonight.

“We have a Code Red,” she said into the receiver before the security guard had a chance to talk.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know... and I don’t want to.” She hung up the phone. She slipped her sweater on, the one her daughter had made for her while in rehab, picked up her purse and grabbed the

sign directing people to head Metro General. She locked the outer doors, hung the sign and walked to her car. She gave a wide berth to the young man's vehicle, its engine still running and the driver's door hanging open.

Nurse Franklin climbed behind the wheel and locked the doors. Regulations required that she stay at the hospital until a decontamination team arrived, but there was no way they could make her stay in that building. She opened the glove compartment and reached deep inside for her "emergency" pack of Camels. Her hands were shaking so bad when she put the cigarette between her lips that she didn't even light it.

She just put both hands on the steering wheel and stared at the front of the building. Her hands slowly tightened their grip until this nurse with twenty-six years under her belt broke down and bawled. The cigarette fell between the driver's seat and the center console, where it stayed until discovered at a used car lot by the cleaning kid, disintegrating once it was no longer held together by the pressure of its hiding place.

When he heard the abrupt click on the other end of the line, it gave Mario a start. Nurse Franklin was usually so nice. He punched up the emergency room on his main monitor, an action that began a moment from his life where he would be able to remember every detail of every second. At first he thought he was seeing a couple piles of hastily discarded clothes. When he realized what they actually were, he sat down so fast he almost missed the chair.

Mario was frozen in place, his mind racing, running through the variety of diseases and biological hazards he knew of that could maybe do this to the human body. Researching that information, and being up-to-date on it, was a hobby, though he thought of it more as a necessity for someone in charge of security at a hospital. He knew his fellow guards mocked him behind

his back – he’d overheard the nickname Wacko Mario more than once – but it was a time like this where that knowledge might come in handy.

He was so wrapped up in trying to figure out the cause that he’d forgotten protocol. He was supposed to call the hospital administrator, Dr. Howard, immediately. He was still running through his mental list when he saw it: The black mass. It oozed out from under the door to one of the exam rooms and slithered halfway across the floor. When it stopped, part of it raised up into the air like it was actually looking around for something. Then the “head” snapped in the direction of another room and disappeared under its door.

The phone was dialed and against his ear faster than Mario had ever moved in his life. Dr. Howard picked up halfway through the fourth ring and he sounded tired. “Yes?” was all he said.

“Dr. Howard, it’s Mario in security. We have a very serious Code Red.”

That woke up the administrator. “What happened?”

“Well, Sir... it’s... I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Stay on the line.”

With his cell gripped tightly in his hand, Dr. Howard crossed the hall to the room that was now his home office. When Timothy had been living with them, it was the guest bedroom. They had planned to keep it a bedroom, potentially where any grandkids might sleep during visits, but those plans were tossed out the window the minute their son came out of the closet. Dr. Howard refused to accept it, so it’s been nine years since Timothy set foot back in the home in which he grew.

He tapped the shift key to wake his laptop. The browser was already open, so he clicked on the special red circle icon in his bookmark bar. The digital age made it so much easier to review security videos. They were automatically archived to a cloud server, accessible from anywhere by the administrative staff. Dr. Howard typed in his password and, once he finally found the file, played the recording. He only needed to watch a few seconds of the attack on the poor young nurse before he paused it.

“Evacuate immediately,” he said into the phone.

Dr. Howard called the Centers for Disease Control and a young woman answered the hotline. He explained the situation as best he could, then gave her the access codes to their video server.

The young woman had seen some of the worst cases of some of the worst diseases the world had to offer. She would be haunted by nightmares for years after watching a mass of black slime devour a woman, who appeared to have been close to her own age, from the inside.

She composed herself as best she could before sending the case up the ladder by waking her supervisor. He, in turn, sped up the process by getting everyone else above him on a conference call.

At 6:17 a.m. the highest ranking officials at the CDC were in one conference room. They had already reviewed the recorded footage and were now watching a live feed. The mass was trying to free itself from the sealed area. It would pound and pound against the doors at either end, occasionally disappear into one of the rooms and then return to try all over again.

All eyes were on the director. Though they knew it was impossible, it felt like he was quieter than the rest of them. He finally turned around and asked the room, “Is everyone out?”

“Yes,” one of them replied. “As of about twenty minutes ago.”

The director turned back to the large flat screen on the wall. He stared at it for another minute before simply stating, “Burn it.”

The End

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