

Rashes

By Friday

Charles “Savior” Dalton is a large, thick-set bighorn sheep. His officer-in-charge is kind enough to let us use one of the holding rooms to record the interview. He sits across from me, speaking clearly into the recording device. It’s obvious he knows from experience how loud to talk to get the mic to pick up his voice.

I earned something of a reputation in my little police department during the outbreak. It wasn’t uncommon during the few weeks the disaster spread through our small town that we’d get ‘jumpers,’ as we called ‘em. Cats, some sick, some having just lost loves ones and coming down with the symptoms themselves, looking to jump from the bridge over the Packa bay. It was a faster way to go, you see. And they were distressed, not in their right minds. Anyways, we got about half as many calls for that sort of thing as we did for riots, break-ins, and other such trouble. Those were bad times, let me tell you. Everyone was working around the clock, and the cells were full of cats- well, more so than usual. And the paperwork! We must have killed a few dozen forests during that... well, I guess it was about a month.

Anyways, where was I? Oh, right, the rash of suicides. Well, as you can see, I’m not the fittest guy on the force. “Big Charlie,” the guys had taken to calling me, and I didn’t mind. All the guys got names like that. Mine was much better than Richard’s. “Little Dick,” they called him. The boys weren’t very creative. Anyways, since I wasn’t the most able anymore, I didn’t go out on the riot calls and such. So it ended up being me who was around when a jumper was called in. The number of times I made that drive... well, sometimes I joked I should have sent in

a request to park in that little diner on the shore. I mean, most of the time, by the point I'd gotten there, they'd already jumped. They weren't like many people who consider jumping, you know, for whom it's more of an attention-grabbing thing, a cry for help. No, these people just knew the jump was a quicker and less painful way to go.

That meant that just as often, I got called up to fill out the paperwork for a body that had been recovered, to try and find some next-of-kin who almost inevitably were also deceased unless they lived east of here. And the ones who lived east of here, they never came to pick up the remains. I don't blame 'em. Risk of infection and all.

The boys at the station got disgusted by the drowned bodies, which is another reason I always volunteered to go. I never much minded, not even when the corpses had been in the water for a few hours and their eyes were all glassy, and not even when they had been in for a day or two and had started to decompose and the smell was nauseating. Probably helps that I'm not a canine like most of the other boys, so my nose ain't too sensitive. But anyways, these corpses never much got to me. The other guys said it was too depressing, but at least those cats had a damn good reason to jump.

I think the incident I remember most, probably the most representative moment, was this cheetah in her thirties. I got the call just after my lunch break. Most of the jumpers fell into the same category: cats, anywhere from twenty to forty, coming down with the symptoms, and having already seen their spouse and kids die from it, knew what was in store. Technically, I'm supposed to talk them down, tell them not to jump, spout some bullshit about how they might live, and tell them to think of all the things they'd miss out on, and so on. If I get a chance, I'm supposed to hit 'em with my Taser or tackle 'em and commit them for a day. How I'd have done

that, with the hospitals and cells full to bursting, I don't know. But anyways, I didn't exactly follow protocol.

They knew they were dying, I knew they were dying, everyone knew they were dying. There wasn't anything left to live for, their families and friends had already passed away, and the only thing worse than dying is being the only survivor. Did you know the Japanese people who survived the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were shunned? The ones that survived both blasts even have a special name and caste that basically meant 'untouchable,' and not in the good way. Learned that in a documentary on the history channel.

So yeah, I didn't bother with that crap. Hell, I even told some of them to jump.

So you may be curious as to why the guys now call me 'Savior.' It's because, percent-wise, I had the best success rate at getting these cats not to jump. A couple of big-city cops can boast higher numbers, but I had the best rate. Out of the two-hundred and ninety-one incidents I was called to, I arrived at ninety-four before the person jumped. And remember, this was all in the span of about a month and a half. Anyways, of those ninety-four, thirty-eight walked away from that bridge. That's a success rate of forty-point-four percent. I don't know of another cop who can boast half that.

So anyways, Mary- that's her name, this cheetah in her thirties. I'm going to try and remember what was said exactly, but no guarantees here. Those conversations I had on the bridge all run together in my head a bit, especially now that I'm getting older.

I pulled up to the bridge and saw her standing, one paw holding a vertical beam as gently as a paper fan, almost draped across the support rather than clutching it. It was rather hot out, too, she was probably sweating bullets from her paw pads. I don't think her hold would have stood up against a stiff breeze. She didn't even turn to look at me when I closed the car door with a slam.

That was always the part I never could understand. None of them ever looked down. They all stared out, towards the sea.

Anyways, I could see the lumps already forming on her arm, and her coat was lookin' patchy, too. She knew she was sick. A few days alive, at most.

I spoke to her like I did everyone else. "What are you waiting for?" I asked. I didn't say it in a spiteful way. The people who wanted to jump, were dead sure- sorry, no pun meant- wouldn't have met me here. Those 'uns met me on the dock, with eyes of glass and coats of mud. I believe if you go look in the mortuary, there's still muck in the corners that we haven't been able to clean up yet.

But anyways, she hadn't jumped because she wasn't sure; she was trying to figure something out. And I wanted her to tell me.

Of course, it's never as easy as just asking once. They're always too caught up in their own thoughts, already withdrawing or withdrawn from the world. You have to coax them out. She didn't respond, so I asked again. "I'm going to walk up a few feet to your right and lean against the railing, but don't worry, I'm not gonna to try and stop you from jumping. I figure, with all that's goin' on, you've got a good reason to."

I walked up and did as I said I would, and she just remained staring. The odd thing is, you see any other suicidal person in any other time and place, they aren't calm. They're hysterical, eyes wild and searching, desperately wanting to be talked down and at the same time desperately wanting to jump, and always on the edge of making the decision to commit to one or choice or the other. These cats... they were different. I saw that far-gaze a lot, like they were bowling pins staring at an oncoming ball, just waiting to be knocked over- oddly calm and at peace with their fate.

So I kept talking to her. “So my question is, since you’ve got a good reason to- hell, several good reasons to, why haven’t you?”

As I turned to look at her, I answered the question for myself just as she spoke, and everything changed in an instant. Her profile showed a distinct bulge in her stomach. “Because how am I supposed to make that decision for two people?”

The easy answer would have been, “You can’t.” Guilt her into stepping off the railing and walking away. But easy answers aren’t always the right ones, and sometimes it’s the truth that we have to make hard decisions. I wasn’t going to let her jump because I was too scared to be honest.

“Because, miss, you made a decision to bring him or her into this world. You made the decision of who to bring that baby into the world with, and where to have them grow up, and so many other things. You made countless decisions for that baby up to this point, each harder than the last. You chose difficult things and sacrificed yourself for him. Now you have another decision to make for him.”

She didn’t speak. I decided it might be best for me to continue. “A lot of things have changed since you made all those decisions, but you still decided that you were going to make decisions regarding his wellbeing since before he was conceived, and you’re still able to. That hasn’t changed.”

“This disease will in all likelihood kill me, officer. And if I survive, I’d be bringing him into a world with so much pain. How can I do that?”

“Ma’am, you can do the easy thing and choose a definite, painless death, or do the hard thing and face the very high probability you will die choking on your own blood for the small gamble that you may survive and bring this child into the world. And even then, you’re gambling

on the child surviving this disease from inside the womb, which may or may not happen. But if you both survive, I *can* promise you he will not see the world as you are seeing it right now. He will not know what was lost. He'll only be aware of what is left and he will see it as a whole, and he *will* find it beautiful, because, well, that's how kids see things."

For several minutes, neither of us spoke. I turned and stared out to the bay, as the sun glimmered off the water and threw dancing lines of light along the underside of the bridge, watched an osprey pluck a fish from the water with a quick dive, and felt the lightest breeze play through my fur and watched it whisper through the treetops on the far shore.

Then she simply asked, "Officer, could you lend me your paw, please?" and I helped her get down. Now, usually, there's a whole process and procedure after that; forms to fill out, possible arrests or involuntary psychiatric commitment, etc. But she asked me a second thing after that, something I couldn't say no to. "Officer, could you take me to the hospital?" I helped her into the car, giving her a paw to steady herself since she was off-balance from the baby, and we drove off.

Now, there's only one hospital in our county. There are a few others in a half-hour drive, but one was not taking patients because of quarantine, and the other was just as full as the near one. I radioed for permission to take her, which I was given, and set off.

I wasn't expecting her to wanna talk. The squad car is a nice place to not have conversations, because the radio is going all the time, so it was fine. I told her as we pulled up that I'd wait with her until I was called on by my dispatcher. I figured that'd be ten, twenty minutes.

I wasn't prepared for what I saw when we walked in. The ER was full of cats. A few other species as well, but almost all cats, all in varying stages of the disease. The smell of blood and death was detectable from the parking lot.

I knew the hospital was prioritizing younger and older patients, but I didn't realize that meant they were turning away adults. There was a jaguar, must have been in his late thirties, all muscle, probably worked a construction job of some sort, jeans torn and dirty, lying dead in a puddle of his own blood on the sidewalk outside. That was the worst I saw, but only because (and I learned this later) the hospital had hired overflow staff entirely to move the bodies into the mortuary.

I think she knew before I did that the wait would be on the order of hours. The turnover rate of beds was high; patients entered the hospital, stayed for a few hours, and then took a trip to the morgue, but there were so many patients waiting to get in.

I couldn't just leave her there. So I took her paw and told her, "Come with me."

When my dispatcher called again, I told them I was doing an emergency run. I'd have to answer for that later, but at the time I didn't care. I took her to one of those big army-surplus stores, got a stethoscope. Got a tarp, too. Then I took her back to my house, laid the tarp down on my bed and told her I had to get back to work. I washed a few cups and placed a few glasses of water beside the bed, and some food- I wish I'd had something healthier, but she had to make do with some leftover pizza- and told her I'd be back in a few hours. I gave her the stethoscope, placed the end on her belly, and told her she could listen to her baby's heartbeat. If it stopped I said, there was a gun in the bedside table and that would do as well as any bridge. Gave her some blankets, dirty old ones I should have thrown out long ago anyways, and left.

It was about ten to six when I got back; I had to talk down another jumper and that put me overtime. I was expecting to come back, roll her body up in a tarp, and call the ambulance to take her away, the gun still clutched in her paw.

The apartment greeted me with complete silence, like any other evening. I thought for sure it meant she was done for. But when I walked into my bedroom she was just shivering on the bed, curled in a blanket. The tarp had served its first use by catching the hair that had fallen out; it would be useful in a few hours when she started coughing up blood, too.

She looked up at me with brown eyes, the only color left on her body beside her black nose, her head almost like a bowling ball with those three wells of black in a triangle, and asked, “Why?”

“I beg your pardon, miss?”

“Why do this for me?”

I paused, remembering Trisha. “Because sixteen years ago, another woman, also with child, jumped from that same bridge because I didn’t open my home to her. Because I was scared, and because back then, I didn’t know how to talk honestly, didn’t know nothing.”

At that point she was taken with the wheezing and couldn’t talk anymore, and the bleeding and coughing began a few hours after that. It was all I could do that night to keep the stethoscope placed right and making sure she had an empty bag to cough into.

She recovered, but I’m guessing you know that. That’s why you’re talkin’ to me, right? **chuckles** She was a good woman, very strong. I’m glad things worked out for her and her son. They still visit, often. I’m surprised they didn’t move to some other town, or Europe, like most of the cats did. Still, I think it’s good for her. Good for all of us. The way he sees the world, without

any of the pain and loss, just a blank slate... well, I think we could all use a bit of that way of lookin' at things.

Interviewer's note: the child was born in good health nineteen days later. He became the first recorded baby born from a mother infected during carriage, and has been given the designation "Adam" by the scientific community. His antibodies were the basis of the French vaccine breakthrough that significantly decreased the mortality rate of CRID across Europe. Charles "Savior" Dalton's nickname is perhaps more accurate than those who gave it to him realize.