

—H19N1

by M. Louis Dixon

“Please stop coughing. Please, oh please, oh please.”

But he didn’t.

Even through his thick bedroom door, each phlegmy bark vibrated off my eardrums. I’d already given him twice the dosage recommended on the cough syrup label, but it didn’t make the slightest bit of difference.

I squinted over at the illuminated numbers of the clock radio, but couldn’t make them out. I reached out and patted across the surface of the nightstand. My fingers struck the eyeglasses instead of trapping them, they scooted away, and I heard them clatter to the floor.

“Oh great,” I said.

With a groan, I pulled myself upright and increased my blind search, this time for the light switch imbedded in the lamp’s electric cord. More items scurried from my groping fingers. A coin panged off the hardwood floor and began a lazy roll beneath the bed. As my fingers found the switch, the wobbly metallic thrum of the wayward coin sounded like a drum roll before an amazing feat. With a click at my fingertips, a *rat-a-tat-tat* and *ta-dah* from beneath the bed, light flooded my eyes with unbearable brightness.

Disoriented from the cusp of true sleep, my brain waddled between reality and rumination: *Momentarily, I stood on a stage, blinded by a brilliant spotlight. The audience was silent and disapproving. From the back of the theater, a lone croupy cough was my only applause. A man’s figure stood in the darkness of stage right; he waited to take my place.*

I blinked, shielded my eyes and sat on the edge of the bed. The theater was gone. Nothing from the flash of dream remained except the continued coughing from the room down the hall.

I gingerly placed my feet onto the floor, careful not to step on my glasses. My knees popped when I squatted to retrieve the fallen spectacles and crackled on the way back up. I checked the time. The numbers were clearer now but still slightly blurred from my sleep hungry eyes. The digital display jumped from 4:19 to 4:20.

“Shit.” I had to be up in a few hours, and I’d hardly slept at all.

I looked to the other side of the bed. Empty. The covers still smooth and undisturbed. Ten months since Allie had been gone, and I still kept to my half.

Joshua’s cough was a dry bark. Each hack a rhythmic punch. He moaned and doubled his efforts. Soon he was gagging between desperate gasps for breath.

I yawned and massaged my temples.

M. LOUIS DIXON

“Daddy.” His voice sounded pinched between his abused vocal cords.

A flash of anger burnt away the web of lethargy.

I didn’t want to have kids. *I told her I was too old to be a father.* Allie was young, beautiful and persistent. I loved her more than my life’s work. She promised me the child would be my legacy—a part of me that would continue on into infinity. Looking into her eyes, I could not deny her the chance at motherhood.

Now I was alone. Frustrated. Resentful.

Then he began to cry. His weak sobs choked off into new fits of coughing. My anger turned to guilt and shame. How could I be so selfish? How could I feel such...hatred? It wasn’t his fault. I’m the one to blame. Me...Me and his mother.

I got up and walked down the hallway to his room. Each step extracted groans and complaints from the floorboards. I pressed my face to the window and looked inside, but it was too dark to see any details. I flipped the switch on the wall and his room flooded with flickering light as the overhead fluorescents warmed up. Joshua scowled and plunged his face into the pillow. His thin, four-year-old back shuddered with each muffled cough buried in the depths of the down-filled pillow. Dark, curly hair, almost the polar opposite of his mother’s and my own, fanned out about his head.

The intercom was cool on my fingertips. I pushed the button. “Hey buddy. Not feeling any better huh?”

His only response was a continued dull hacking that escaped harshly when he looked at me. Dark brows knotted above scrunched eyes. He shook his head *No* while tears streamed down his face. Finally catching his breath, he began to sob.

“I know, I know,” I said. “I’m going to get something that’ll work better than that stupid ol’ cough syrup.”

It had gotten worse so fast, quicker than I’d expected.

I went into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. A row of vials were scattered on the top shelf. Standing on tiptoes, I peered closely to read their labels. My life’s work was displayed in each vial. I thrilled a bit to see them aligned so.

The H1N1 was my museum piece; the recreation of the 1918 Spanish influenza, it was a project that took more than a decade to complete and less than ten minutes to smuggle out of the lab. The H5N1 avian influenza held us in awe for the last couple of years; its almost sentient strives of mutation kept it bounding forward into more virulent strains. It was the H19N1 that made me tremble. My child...my *true* child.

The hemagglutinin subtype was discovered in an isolated niche deep in the Amazon rainforest. Found in a small community of snakes that bore rudimentary feathers about their necks, they’d been named Quetzalcoatl after the Aztec mythological beast of similar description. From these hidden creatures we extracted this—most amazing—glycoprotein, and H19N1 was born. Where H5N1 had seemed almost conscious in its mutation, H19N1 was outright deliberate. Somebody at the World Health Organization had compared the H5N1 to a category 5 hurricane. If that was true, then Quetzalcoatl influenza was somewhere in the category 7 or 8 region. I’m sure that hurricanes don’t go that high, but this virus does.

My research created the cure for avian influenza.

The current administration felt it was important to boost the public relations and arranged a press conference. They were cold in their politeness when they chose