

The Chicken Run

Tonight's the night of my test.

If I pass the test, I'll be part of *The Nostromos* – the fiercest tribe in the sector.

If I don't pass? I'll be part of a much bigger club...but I don't like to think about that.

It's October 31st – my 10th birthday. In the old days, my sister Joanie used to tease me about being born on Halloween. She called me her 'little monster'. I pretended I hated it, but I didn't really. I liked the idea of being a monster. I don't any more. And I don't like to think about Joanie.

Since the plague happened, it's important to be in a gang; especially when you're little, like me. I've been under the protection of *The Nostromos* since they found me hiding under our old house. I think Brodie, the leader, liked me because of the way I'd fought when they'd dug me out from the cellar. He called me a *Tasmanian Devil* – like the thing in the cartoons with Bugs Bunny that was all hissing and spitting and whirling in a mini-tornado of energy. I'd fought like that as they pulled me into the light because I'd thought they'd been the other things. I was lucky Brodie found me amusing – a lot of other gangs would have just left me. Others might have killed me.

I don't know why the plague happened –nobody does. One day everything was normal. Going to school, fighting with my sister over the dinner table until Dad would tell us that was enough. The things you do when you're eight years old. And then? Overnight the adults started to get sick. At first, it was just a bad cold, but it quickly got worse. My dad never got ill before then, but he caught *The Yellow* just like everyone else. He didn't last any longer, either. He died before my mother – but only by a few hours. Joanie and I tried to make them better: she was twelve, and for once I didn't mind that she acted like she was in charge: taking the wet towels, trying to stop their burning fever, giving them the medicine she could find in the house –feeding aspirin and paracetamol down them. She rang the hospital when none of it was working. Of course, ringing the hospital didn't do any good either – everyone there was just as sick as Mam and Dad were. Not much use having a doctor when he's throwing up blood and clawing at his burning skin as it turns more and more yellow until he drops down dead.

It didn't take long – two days from the first coughing to the last dying rattle coming from their swollen, yellow throats.

It was hard to tell how widespread it was because there was no-one on television to inform us. All the stations went off pretty quickly. Right after that emergency news broadcast with the yellow-looking newsreader announcing that the end was near. That there wasn't anything that could be done, and no-one was safe. Then he'd thrown up a massive gusher of blood all over the news desk in front of him. Joanie had screamed then – she'd been taking a break from Mam and Dad's fevered shouting upstairs. She grabbed the remote off me and switched the television off. She tried to calm me down, but I could tell she didn't believe her own words when she promised me everything was going to be okay.

Our parents died three hours later.

When Joanie came downstairs to tell me and put the television back on, looking for help from somewhere, there was nothing on but a screen saying '*Broadcast Problem. Wait for Announcement*'. We waited for a day. But there was no announcement. Our phones had no signal, and the internet was down. We didn't go outside. Not after we saw what was happening out there. Most people stayed indoors, but some of them were out there lying dead in the middle of the road or their gardens. Joanie closed the curtains after we'd seen Mr Davids from next door shoot himself in his front yard.

Not everyone died because of the plague itself.

We sat on the big sofa – the one we’d shared with Mam and Dad watching TV so many evenings –Joanie and me fighting for space, kicking at each other until we were told to stop. Now, Joanie hugged me, crying quietly. I didn’t mind her hugging me the way I used to.

It was late on that second night we heard the noise from upstairs. A low groan and the sound of someone getting out of bed: I knew the sound of my parents’ bed and the way it creaked on the floor well enough to know what it was. Joanie held me at arm’s length and beamed a smile, “I got it wrong! I thought they were dead, but they’re going to be okay!” She hugged me again, and her smile looked as if it was going to split her face in two; it was so big.

I try to remember that smile.

She jumped off the sofa, leaving me in her dust. I could hear her shouting with joy as she ran upstairs, “Dad! Mam! You’re okay...” but then her voice changed. There was silence for a moment. Just a moment, and then she began to scream. She screamed really loud.

“Run Harry!” she screamed from somewhere above me, “Run and hide, they’re...”

And then her words just turned into another scream. I could hear other noises – not screams precisely, more like angry moans... And then there was ripping and tearing: noises I could hear even above my sister’s screams. And then she wasn’t screaming any more. But I could still hear the moaning, and wet, sloppy sounds. So I did what Joanie told me to do in her last words.

I ran.

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I’d been surviving on my own for almost a year when *The Nostromos* found me. I’d learned to look after myself pretty good. I’d been staying in a deserted house just a few streets over from where I’d grown up. It had a *For Sale* sign outside, so I knew there was no-one inside. There was no food in there, and I got hungry pretty quickly. It should have been easy enough to get food – it wasn’t like any adults were running the supermarkets anymore, and I didn’t need any money. But everyone else was doing the same thing, and the shelves didn’t stay full for long.

The first time I’d seen other kids I’d waved and run towards them. I quickly realised that was a bad idea. There had been a gang of about six of them – they were older than me, maybe thirteen and fourteen. When they saw me heading towards them, they’d nudged each other and picked up the sticks and knives they had with them. I ran, and they chased. I managed to outrun them and squeeze through a hole in a fence as they charged after me, hiding for hours until I was sure they’d gone and I made my way back to my new house.

After that, I was careful. I stayed out of view and learned to be quiet. I only took what I could carry when I did find a shop with food left in it. It meant I had to go out more often, but I knew it meant I’d be quicker running if anyone did see me.

The power went off after a few weeks. I guess whoever managed it had died along with everyone else. Except, of course, it wasn’t *everyone* who had died. It was just the grown-ups. I’d spied the gangs wandering the streets – fighting with each other, claiming their territories with weapons and stuff. I saw them killing each other. But I made sure I stayed hidden. Watching. And the oldest kids I’d seen were probably around fifteen. Some of them were big – as big as grown-ups, but you could tell they were kids all the same.

There weren’t any bodies lying around on the street anymore – not like in the first twenty-four hours of the plague. None of the yellowed, oozing bodies I’d seen on the News and outside our house in those early days. The only bodies out on the streets now were the victims from the fighting

that had happened or kids like Joanie who got caught by the plague victims. You could tell looking at what was left of their bodies. They hadn't died in street fights. There wasn't enough of them left for that. But there wasn't as many of them as you'd think. I tried not to think about that – in my happy thoughts, I pretended it meant all the kids had managed to escape. But I knew that wasn't likely. I remembered Joanie, and I thought it was more likely that anyone caught had just been...taken away. For later.

So I managed to survive. I didn't leave the house much, and at nights I could hear the gangs driving around the streets in cars they'd found. A lot of them crashed: not surprising when they were all too young to have had any lessons. I heard the sounds of explosions – of things being blown up and windows being smashed in the few shops that still hadn't been completely emptied. But worst of all was the howling and the moaning. Sometimes the sounds seemed close, and I wondered if they could smell me. Smell my blood. Whether they'd be moaning *fee-fi-fo-fum* when they broke down the door and finally caught me.

And then the *Nostromos* found me. They must have seen me when I'd been scouting for food. I don't day-dream anywhere near as much as Joanie used to laugh at me for, but maybe I had been a little bit that day. Perhaps it was just bad luck. But they must have seen me and followed me back and dragged me out from the cellar. I wore myself out trying to fight them all, even when they held me down, and I knew it was useless. I thought they were going to kill me and do whatever the gangs did with the little kids like me. But like I say, Brodie seemed to at least think I was funny enough to keep around.

Brodie was fourteen. I'd seen him hanging around town before the plague. My sister had told me stories about him. He'd been expelled from school. He rode a motorbike – on the roads and without a helmet, even though he wasn't old enough. He'd stolen a car once. Another time he put five kids who'd attacked him in hospital – or that was how the stories went. Maybe some of them weren't true. Perhaps some of them hadn't happened exactly like the kids used to whisper about it. It didn't matter – that was all BP. *Before Plague*. All I knew was that Brodie had stopped whatever might have happened to me.

The Nostromos were one of the toughest gangs around. There were 76 members in the gang, and I knew every one of them by name. Some of them I was still careful around, making sure I was never on my own, but most of them were pretty cool with me. The gang HQ was the old Tyrell Tower block. BP it used to be a block of flats filled with old people. PP, it had been cleared out by the *Nostromos*. I didn't know how or what they'd had to do to make it theirs, all I knew was that by the time I was 'taken in', it was all theirs – barricaded in and protected from any possible attacks from other gangs or the plague victims.

I had to cook and clean up and do anything I was told. They called me 'the little workhorse' at first, and eventually that just became LW. Brodie explained it to me: if I wanted protection, I had to give something back, and I was too small to do anything outside the flats, so I had to do my stuff inside. It would all change, he promised me, when I turned ten and 'proved myself'.

It seemed to take forever for my tenth birthday to come around. I ticked the days off on a calendar I'd found as it got closer and closer. Scab, one of the older kids and Brodie's second-in-command, had laughed, "Blimey, I've never seen anyone so keen to go through what you've got ahead of you."

I hadn't known what he meant and didn't care. I just wanted to be free from doing the washing and cleaning.

And so here we are tonight.

My initiation test.

“Not long to go...” –Hicks, a muscly kid of about thirteen, with half his hair missing and no front teeth. He didn’t talk about how either had happened, but he was one of the toughest fighters in the gang, “Rather you than me, little buddy.” He says, ruffling my hair as he goes past. If almost anyone else had done that I’d have bitten their hand off, but with Hicks, I take it and smile.

“Hope you got your running shoes on, LW.” Dante grins – he was the one who gave me my name, and I don’t think he’ll ever stop calling me LW, even if I make it through tonight.

“Stay sharp out there tonight, little man...”

“Don’t you freeze...”

“Put your pedal to the metal, you hear me?”

On and on it goes – and other than Jester, who tells me he’s looking forward to having my portion of dinner if I end up ‘not being around no more’, everyone seems on my side, trying to ease my mind and my shaking legs.

I’m scared. More scared than I’ve ever been in my life. But I know why I have to do it.

I have to prove myself. To prove I have what it takes. I know all of this, but still listen as Brodie walks me to the talk link fence, twelve feet high, padlock in place, half of the gang behind us – keeping their eyes peeled to make sure no other gang tries to jump us. The other half of the gang I can just about see in the dark, the flame from their burning torches a beacon for me to aim for.

“It’s only a quarter of a mile, LW,” Brodie tells me, looking me in the eye. “You’re a fast little dude. You can do it. Right?”

I nod because my mouth feels too dry to speak.

He looks at me, “This is your last chance to back out. Do you understand? You can say no, and you stay down in the kitchens, slopping out and doing the crap that needs doing. But it’s your choice; you get me?”

I nod again and find the words, “I get you.”

“So what’s it going to be?”

“I’m ready,” I say, holding a hand against my leg to stop it shaking.

Brodie nods, “You know what we’ve got to do, don’t you? We can’t make this easy for you. And we can’t help you. You remember what happened to Jay, don’t you?”

I swallow and nod. I remember very well what happened to Jay. I still have nightmares about it sometimes.

Brodie claps me on the shoulder. “Ok. Let’s do this. I’ll be on the bike, and I’ll be around the other side by the time you’re there...I’ll see you on the other side, okay?”

If I make it to the other side, I think.

The gang form a kind of aisle for me to walk down. All of them are holding sticks, baseball bats, metal rods; a few have trash can lids.

Brodie is on his bike now, the engine revving, his hand on the horn, ready to press it. He drives crazy. I know he'll have spun that bike and be round the block to be there waiting at the other gate.

If I make it.

"You want a boost up?" Hicks asks me, "Nothing says you can't. It's only when you drop to the other side you're on your own."

I nod. I'm trembling with so much adrenaline I'm not sure I'd be able to climb up the mesh fence myself.

Hicks boosts me up easily like I'm a feather, and I grab hold of the top of the wire fence, pulling myself up.

"There's nineteen of 'em in there, LW..."

I know this. All of us younger kids in the HQ know. It's already a legend. How Hicks and his scout team hunted them. One by one. Somehow getting them back here and trapping them in this caged-in block of streets I'm looking down at now. Nineteen of them. It was supposed to be twenty but on that last hunt, when one of them had taken out three Scouters before Hicks took it to pieces, Brodie had said nineteen was enough, saying, "There's about 30 million more of them out there, we can't get 'em all..."

"...do *not* try to engage with them." Hicks is telling me, "Just run. We'll be there on the other side. Got it?"

I nod one more time and then drop myself down, landing on the ground like a cat. I've been practising from my bunk for two months now. Spraining my ankle on landing would not be a good idea. The second I land I hear Brodie sounding the horn, blaring into the night, and then he's roaring off, peeling around the corner. The moment the horn sounds the gang start banging the chain fence with their sticks, hammering bin lids with the metal bars they've brought.

I don't hate them for it. It's part of the rules.

Then they're all out of my mind. I'm only thinking of one thing as I sprint forward – not full speed, not quite: I run at three quarter to see anything coming from the side alleys, anything that might...and there's one! An old woman, barely any skin left on her – rising from the pile of rubbish to my left, struggling to get up on her skeletal legs. But I'm already twenty feet past her. She's never going to catch me. I see something to my left- climbing from a recycling bin, stirred from its...whatever plague dead zombies do instead of sleep. It looks like it was once a fat man, so fat he's still got some meat hanging off him. As I tear past I slam the lid back down on him, not breaking stride. I'm sixty feet in now, and I can see the torches ahead of me – my goal line. I streak onwards.

As I pass another alley on my right, I see a trio of them, and they're running. When I was younger, Joanie showed me an old zombie movie on TV once. I cried, Mumm screamed, and Joanie got into trouble. Those zombies were slow. Those zombies were *fake*: PP zombies aren't like that. Those that still have working muscles: that have got some flesh since they died; they can be mucho fast. As fast as they were when they were alive. Luckily, the three coming from the alley don't look as if they did much exercise BP. Back before they were puking out their own intestines, and I'm past the alley entrance before they're anywhere near.

I'm halfway across now, and I'm not even breathing hard. The adrenaline is working for me now, but I can hear more of them – I can hear their mewling, moaning cries. I'm fast, but I'm sweating – they can smell it: I don't know if they can see or think or feel or taste, but I'm pretty sure they can smell. I also don't know how many of them are in front and how many are behind...so I just keep

running. I'm about two hundred metres from the fence now, the torches like a finishing line. Two hundred metres isn't much. I used to run it in PE. I can do that, I can...

I'm spun off balance as an arm grasps at my leg from what I thought was just an empty box on the ground. I stumble and almost fall before I manage to right myself, but I've been slowed down. I hear the gang gasp as they see what's happened. I can hear them shouting encouragement at me, I'm about 160 metres from them, and I've got my balance back – enough so that when an old man, still wearing the tattered remains of his old postman's uniform lunges at me from a stairwell I'm able to duck and he goes sailing over my head, landing in a heap past me.

120 metres and I can hear footsteps behind me, but I'm too far ahead for them to catch up.

100. The steps are falling back; I'm outpacing him or her or it...

80 metres. The gang cheering.

60 metres. Brodie is there – I can see him screeching to a stop on his bike and jumping off, pushing to the front of the crowd.

40 metres and I glance to my left, checking the last alleyway; determined not to get caught out when I think I'm safe the way Jay did.

20 metres and I'm almost at the fence...and there's one of them standing in front of me. Standing there as though he's been waiting for me.

He's a man. Or he *was* a man. 41 years old. A purple t-shirt hanging around his sagging body – I can see it says "*World's #*" but the rest of it is missing. His rotting skin is covered in boils and half his left arm is missing. The hair on the half skull he still has sticks out. His teeth are bared as he lifts his one full arm out to try and grab me.

I feint and duck and I'm passed him, leaping for the fence. I make it, and I'm climbing, but the effort of the run is catching up with me now and my arms are struggling, my legs scrabbling at the chain fence, not getting a grip, slipping...and then the zombie has my leg. He's got hold of it with his one arm, and he's dragging me and I can feel my fingers slipping as his mouth, dripping with black gunge and rotted teeth, but still powerful enough to break my flesh reach out to bite and I stare down in horror as his teeth close in and...

And then his head explodes in a thunderous blast and he's thrown back and I'm free and I'm climbing and I'm over, falling and Brodie catches me one-armed – his other still holding the sawn-off shotgun he just blasted through the fence.

I'm gasping for breath, as I pant, "What...what...about the rules...No help?"

Brodie shrugs, a broad smile on his face, "I think we need to change the rules a bit, kid. It's us against them. And we're family..."

And then they hoist me onto their shoulders, carrying me down the street, away from *The Chicken Run* alley.

I reach into my shirt pocket while they're carrying me and take out the photo. The last picture I have of my old family. Me and Joanie, in between my Mum and Dad on our sofa. It was taken on Father's Day – just a day before the plague struck. I take one last look at my mother in her blue hoodie and jeans and her hair tied back. I look at my father, smiling, happy in the purple t-shirt we've just given him for Father's Day. The one that reads 'World's #1 Dad.'

I've looked at the photo too much, for too long PP. I drop it and it falls, trampled under the feet of the gang as they carry me back to the Towers. No longer a workplace. A home.

My new home.

My new family.