

A Slow Day

By

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(Writing as Saul P. Tiler)

Toby liked to look at the babies best. He didn't have to. It wasn't part of the job. All he had to do was deliver the form, read out the questions and record the relative's answers. But he tried to do something extra every time he did the job.

'Make everyday worth it', that's what Bernice always said.

And it wasn't always babies who were infected. Sometimes it was teenagers or even older people. But that didn't happen as much now. Not like at the start, that was when it was really bad. But he liked the babies. The son of the parents at his next interview, was just on the other side of the glass. He was lying on an exam table being prodded and poked by normal doctors. His tiny arms and legs stuck out at strange angles, still, as if frozen in position. This one looked a bit like Toby, but to be honest most babies did.

He liked to know who he was talking about when he read out the form, he like to know what they looked like. So he would visit the Slowtowns they were allocated to, if it was near enough to reach on

his pushbike. He wasn't allowed to drive a car. In that way he was just like them.

Toby turned and nearly walked right into an orderly who was pushing a trolley of bio-waste along the corridor. He was moving pretty fast for a Slow, but you could still see that strange balancing act they had to do when they walked. The tiny motors in his bacorette gently fed him smoke to stop him from being asphyxiated by his bad habit. The vapour drifted lazily out of the orderly's nose and mouth as his jaw started to move up and down. Toby realised that he had started to talk and fished the phone from out of his pocket and clicked open the Drawl app. Their voices always sounded like whale song to Toby and it was difficult to make out any real words without using the app. By the time the jaw had closed and stayed closed the orderly had almost passed Toby. A pinging sound indicated that the Drawl app had finished processing. An artificial sing song voice from the phone declared:

"Conversation processed. Warning, message contains colloquial insults, swear or curse words and blaspheming elements."

Toby decided not to open the translation. He decided to just run past the orderly and was tempted to flick him the finger but there was no point. He would never see it.

He made it outside to where his pushbike was locked up near the entrance. Toby paused as there was a Slowgirl standing beside the cycle, just looking at it. Her eyes seemed to be focussed on the shiny bell on the handlebars. For a moment Toby thought that she was trying to steal it, but it was impossible for them to cycle. Balance didn't care about time, that's what Bernice always said. He looked

at the girl properly and could see that there were tears forming in her eyes. She was pretty, he didn't like to see a pretty girl cry.

Toby did not know why she had become so upset just by looking at his bike. It was a really cool bike. But he felt sorry for her. It would take her a few minutes to blink and even then the tears wouldn't clear. He decided to be a gentleman and dab her eyes with his hanky, at least he could help her with that, even if he couldn't understand why she was crying. He gently soaked up the tears with the edge of the handkerchief and then went back to unlocking his bike. He carefully put on his cycle clips and helmet, then moved next to the curb. Before mounting the bicycle, Toby decided to steal one more look at the pretty girl.

He wished he hadn't.

Her hands had fully opened at her sides and her arms were beginning to raise up to shield her face. Her mouth was a petrified oval and her eyes were trying to match the shape. She hadn't realised that Toby was trying to help her. In her Slowgirl world all she saw was a shape rushing toward her and reaching toward her face. Toby should have known better, that's why they hated normal people, deciding what's best for them and just doing it. He pedalled away toward the nearest exit out of the Slowtown, taking care to keep as far away from the statues that littered the roads and pavements as he did so.

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When he got to the address, there were police. Toby didn't like police. They had taken him to the Home and told him that it was

for his own good. He couldn't really remember his parents because he was so little, but he could remember that they didn't cry when he left.

Toby was supposed to take the form to the eighth floor of the block. Eighth floor, apartment 856. But the police, the uniformed ones, were moving people away from the building. They were doing it quietly, as if they didn't want to make a fuss. Toby took a look around and decided to risk locking his bike up to a nearby charge post. There were still other police, normal dressed ones, at the building's entrance. A large bear of an officer kept looking at him as he argued with a resident of the block about the sudden barricade. A trundler ambled through a gap in the halted traffic, its two fat wheels at each end making wet sloppy sounds as if the tyres had not been properly inflated. The lid of the container on the platform between the wheels whirred open as it turned toward the block's maintenance entrance. The pincer like arms on the sides opened, in anticipation of gripping the recycling bins within the dark alcove. Toby checked that the bear policeman wasn't watching and then climbed into the trundler's hopper. He had used this trick to get out of the Home when he was little, but they always found him before he got too far. He tried not to giggle as the robot moved into the building and quickly rolled out before the contents of the first bin was deposited on his head. He had made that mistake a few times when he was little as well.

Toby fished out the torch that doubled as his bike's headlight and shone it around the gloomy bay. He was in the underground car park and was careful not to shine his torch toward the main entrance which had been sealed with a transparent roll down barrier. Shadowy

uniforms could be seen guarding beyond. It was not long before he reached the stairwell, avoiding the elevator. They hardly ever worked since the Slow came and Toby hated the idea of getting stuck in them. It wouldn't take him long to get to the eighth floor, especially if he made a game out of it. He would count the steps and see if he could get to a hundred before he reached the apartment. He was good at counting, he thought as he silently mouthed the numbers up to ten, climbing the first set of stairs.

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He checked the number on the door twice. Sometimes they flipped around like sixes and nines did or bad kids nicked them, but he was sure this was the place. He could hear large voices inside, maybe argument voices. Toby didn't much like arguments, that's why he liked Slow people, they never argued much. Well not arguments you could understand.

He fetched the paperwork out of his satchel and double checked the pages were all there before knocking. When he did knock it went very quiet in the flat, very quickly. For a moment he thought the door was going to open because he heard a big click, but it stayed shut. Toby didn't know what the big click was but it had made the people inside quiet. He was about to knock again when the door opened.

A woman with big eyes opened the door, she had nice hair, mom hair. She tried to smile but she just gulped hard and whispered "oh God, "under her breath.

"I'm from the Health Service, I have a questionnaire about your son. Can I come in now?" Toby said.

"We do not need anything at the moment, this is a difficult time for us, maybe come around tomorrow," mom hair said and tried to edge the door shut but Toby had already crossed the threshold enough that his trainers accidentally stopped any attempts to shut him out. He tried smiling up at her and only then realised that she did not have big eyes, but her makeup had all smudged for some reason, making her eyes look like big black holes. She must have been crying about her son being a Slow now. That made Toby sad, but he had to do his job.

"I have to do it now Mom Ha-, I mean Mrs. Keyes. The doctors need more information so no more children get slow."

He heard the click again and suddenly the door opened wider. A man stood over him with a smile on his face. He looked like he was putting something in the back on his trousers, or maybe just trying to keep them up, Toby could relate to that. He smiled, that was a good sentence, Bernice would be pleased with him.

"We can do that young man, the wife and I are just a bit busy though so do you mind asking questions as we work?"

The man smiled again and wiped an oily mark from his face. He sure must have been working hard on something. He had a long chin and looked worried, thick lines stretching down the side of his face. Like he was 'old' tired, like the doctors at the hospital when they worked lots of shifts, like when the first slow outbreak, like-. Toby stopped thinking. He was 'running away with himself again' and Bernice hated it when he did that. The man, nodded, smiled and

gestured for him to enter the flat. Toby did so, he needed the form to be completed.

"Gordon, he's-."

Mr Keyes hand shot out, palm upright and Toby flinched. He thought for a moment that Gordon was going to hit the lady, but it was just a sign to make her quiet.

"Are you tired young man? I wouldn't be surprised it's a long climb up here. Charlie, why don't you make him a cup of tea? You do drink tea don't you...?"

"Toby, my name is Toby, can I call you Gordon, Mr Keyes?"

"Of course you can Toby, but how -"

"And can I call you Charlotte, Mrs Keyes? I saw your names on the papers. I'm not supposed to look but I forgot the address."

Charlotte didn't look at Toby when she replied, but instead stared at her husband as she did so.

"You can call me whatever you like Toby, but you have to go after your tea. You can leave the papers if we haven't finished answering. Understand?"

"I'm sure Toby understands, but he has to get his job done, Charlie."

"Don't," she said with a hard edge to her voice. before walking away. They were doing that grown up thing where they looked like they were talking to you but they were actually talking to each other. Toby had had some foster parents like that, but he was smarter than they thought.

The living room didn't look right. The curtains were pulled and it was daytime. Even though there were no dirty plates or pizza boxes, Toby could smell bad food. Some of the Slows, the ones that

didn't get it as bad, they could still eat off of plates. They call them Mo's but Toby didn't know why. They took a long time to eat and the food smell was stale, hanging in the air. Like here.

"Take a seat, my wife will be out in a min."

"Is your sink broken Gordon?"

Mr Keyes looked taken aback for a second and then looked over to where the apartment's kitchen was. The area was partitioned off with thick plastic sheeting, grey and translucent. Toby could see Mrs Keyes moving about there, just a shape, indistinct, badly defined, ghostly. 'More good words Bernice' Toby said to himself.

"Oh yeah, that. We're having some work done. A broken boiler. There's a risk of a little gas spilling out so we keep it screened off."

Didn't smell like gas, smelt like they hadn't done their dishes. There was shouting from a megaphone coming from far below the flat.

"How about we get through those questions?" Gordon said, staring at the front door.

He made Toby feel nervous and he nearly jumped out of his skin when Mrs Keyes burst through the screen with a steaming cup. She placed it on the dusty coffee table and managed a smile before turning to her husband.

"There's a problem in the kitchen you need to fix darling" she said, again with a bite to her voice.

"Nothing that can't wait sweetheart. Toby can smell it too, but I've already explained it to him."

"I can't stop it; we have to-"

The noise of the fist against the coffee table, made Toby jump but he managed to pick up his tea on reflex before Gordon's blow knocked it over. Mrs Keyes had become quiet and stared at her husband as he spoke.

"You're upsetting our guest Charlie. I will check the kitchen, while you answer his questions. Do you understand? Toby can't leave until you've answered his questions. Isn't that right Toby?"

"Sure is Gordon, it's my job."

"Charlotte?"

"Yes, okay, I'm okay. Let's just get it done." She replied.

Mrs Keyes nodded and watched as Gordon got up and walked toward the kitchen, her eyes seemed to settle on a square lump tucked into the back of his trousers.

Pulling papers out of his bag and his favourite pen from the front flap, Toby looked around for something to lean on. Most houses or flats had a book or a magazine lying around, but everything here looked as if it had been packed up for moving, or not unpacked yet. Mrs Keyes must have understood his confusion as she reached under the chair she was sitting on and pulled out a thick textbook. Toby wiped the dust off it.

"What's biochemistry Char-Mrs Keyes," he said hesitantly reading the cover, pronouncing each syllable of the new word carefully.

"It's what me and my husband used to do, a sort of science."

"Good science or bad science?"

"What sort of question is that Toby?"

Her voice had been sharp, icy, like the matron in the Home when Toby had questioned her about, well, about anything.

"I'm sorry, it's just Bernice says some science is good and some science is bad even when it's the same science."

"Well I don't know this Bernice but that doesn't really make sense, does it now. Something can't be good and bad can it Toby?"

"That's what I said, but Bernice just said, go tell Daedalus, but I don't know anyone called that. It's a weird name."

"Oh god, Toby look, this is not a place you--"

Mrs Keyes just stopped. Gordon had walked out of the kitchen and was standing behind Toby's chair and she looked frightened. Toby didn't turn around but he knew Gordon was there, he could see the man's shadow. It looked like the shadow was pointing at Toby's head. But the shadow's hand was a funny shape, blocky.

"Let him ask his questions," Gordon said, "the boilers fixed."

Toby shuffled his papers like the people on the news did and took the lid off of his biro.

"Ok, they've filled in your names, the address and Daniel's name."

Mrs Keyes mouthed the word 'Daniel' like it stung her lips.

"But I have to fill out the other stuff. So where were you when you first realised Daniel was affected?"

Toby said the word 'affected' very carefully. You weren't to say 'slow' as people sometimes got upset, some people used it like a bad word. Toby had even heard people call him it. People were stupid and hurtful sometimes. And he had to say it carefully as once he had said 'infected' instead by accident, and that had really upset a woman.

"Just after he was born, the wriggling was not as fast as it should be. Next question." said Gordon.

"No." said Mrs Keyes.

"You don't want me ask the next question?" said Toby, still carefully writing down what Gordon had said, grateful of the pause.

"No that wasn't when we first noticed, it was when I was pregnant with him. It was eight months and I couldn't feel him move. We thought-"

"Charlie this isn't going to help." Gordon said, walking around the couch and sitting next to Toby, shoving the phone or whatever it was into the back of his trousers.

"It's going to help me. We thought he was dead Toby, but he wasn't. He was just...he just had the condition."

The biro moved frantically as Toby tried to write everything down. He had never heard of someone going slow before they were born, normally the virus struck when they were, well, bigger than born.

"And had the affected been near anyone else who had been affected themselves or had family who were affected?"

Toby stared at the sentence twice to make sure he had said it right and because of that he had not noticed how quiet the adults had been.

"Well Gordon, had the 'affected' been near other 'affected'?" Charlotte looked angry now, still sad but spiky underneath it. She looked like autumn might, Toby thought. Then he thought what a funny thought that was.

Gordon stared back at his wife but his gaze faltered and he couldn't hold eye contact. He smiled at Toby, a real sympathetic smile this time. The kind of smile that someone gives you when they like you, and you don't even have to smile back.

There was a crash and shouts from a lower floor and Charlotte looked imploringly at her husband. He looked away and turned to Toby.

"Do you feel different to other people Toby?" he said.

"I don't know Gordon; I find it hard to comprehend how other people feel."

"But you know they treat you different."

"Yes, sometimes they call me special."

"That's because you have--"

"I know what I have. That's not something I want to talk about right now." Toby found he was upset; he was never upset before about being who he was. He had always been happy, different, but happy. Now he felt discontented, which was a word he didn't even know he knew. He was angry at Gordon, he had the feeling that he had caused this change in him. The man seemed to notice the change and was smiling. Gordon was looking over at Charlotte but she was clearing boxes, revealing a vent with a loose cover.

"I know you feel different now. Imagine if you could feel like that all the time Toby."

"Did you do this to me?"

Gordon looked proudly at Toby until he realised that Charlotte had stopped and was staring at him. His demeanour changed and he stood, turning away from her gaze.

"We worked for the government, trying to help when the virus first broke out and then worked on a cure when things had settled down. You remember that Toby, just after, during the Confusion."

Toby did. When the Slows appeared it caused panic. Family members who were not infected, could not cope with family members

who were. But they were the lucky ones. Whole households of people had gone slow. Unable to communicate properly, they wandered the street. Their mouths were contorted in a slow motion scream, clawing at the thin air between them and anyone who might help them. A lot of people had been killed during the Confusion. Bernice said it was because someone had used the 'Z word' but Toby did not know what that meant.

"I remember, Gordon."

"And you remember after, when it all calmed down and the Slows were given their own places. Remember how people said how much better the country was, now there were less people. Did you think that was fair Toby?"

"People like what they like, I'm not sure whether morality enters into it. Have you got a gun in the back of your trousers?"

Gordon looked surprised and then nodded.

"I'm sorry Toby, as you're probably about to work out, we didn't think it was fair. But the government sacked us for trying to change things."

"An antidote," Toby said, looking down at his own pudgy fingers in a new way. He wondered what he could make them do now.

"Yes, and when they forced us to resign we tried again, moving when we could, always trying until finally we succeeded."

"Succeeded?" said Charlotte, a look of disbelief on her face, "you call what happened a success?"

Gordon clenched his teeth and stared pointedly at the floor.

"The antidote failed. It speeds up connections but then burns them out, the Slow only speed up for a while and then they..." Gordon couldn't finish his sentence.

"Then they stop. Except for the young, only those who haven't reached full maturity. Or not been born yet. Only they go back to being slow." Charlotte was staring at a picture of her son, one of the only ornaments in the room, the light freezing his cherubic expression forever.

"I don't know how he got infected, without infecting me. God maybe it was airborne then, maybe in the food..." Charlotte's voice trailed off to a whisper and Toby didn't hear the rest.

The police were close now. Toby could hear doors being kicked down at the far end of the corridor. He stood carefully as Gordon's focus was on the floor and made for the door but the click of the gun's hammer made him stop in his tracks.

"I'm sorry Toby, the unit needs a little longer to build up enough pressure for the formula to explode and become aerosol. I need a way to slow down the police."

He waved the pistol gesturing toward the kitchen. Toby moved slowly, wary of the way Gordon's gun hand trembled. He wasn't sure whether it was fear or desperation. Both could hurt him.

"What about normal people Gordon, what happens to them?"

The man was switching his gaze between the door and Toby's face. He couldn't see what Toby could see. He couldn't see Charlotte's face covered in tears, imploring hands stretching toward her husband.

"They turn Slow. From this height, with these air currents, half the city will be affected. They can't turn their back on them then. They can't ignore people like my boy. That's what happens to normal people."

Toby shook his head, as much agreeing as trying to clear the mist that was beginning to seep into his thoughts. He was next to the kitchen dividers now, and he could see a small flask with a sticker marked 'Test' on its side. As Gordon talked, Toby slipped it into the waistband at the back of his trousers. Two could play at that game, he thought. Smart Toby didn't know why but somewhere he could hear stupid Toby saying he wanted it for something. Something important.

Outside the hard voices of the Policemen bounced off of the barricaded door.

"I have one more question Gordon. You've told me about the effect it would have on normal people."

"Yes, yes," the man said impatiently wiping sweat from his brow.

"But you didn't tell me what effect it would have on me."

For a second the gun lowered and Gordon looked lost, as if all the fire left him for a second, but the sudden impact of the policeman's boot on the wood panelled door brought him back to life.

"I'm sorry Toby, I just need to delay them for a few more minutes," he said, raising the gun and advancing on the boy.

The scream of 'No' was punctuated by the percussive slap of the tea tray across the back of Gordon's head. He staggered and his wife pushed her advantage by grabbing at his gun hand. For a moment he acted on reflex and struggled before realising that his assailant was Charlotte. He stared at her in horror, betrayal pulling his face aghast.

"The vent Toby, the vent," she said before renewing her efforts to wrestle the gun from her misled husband, who started to

babble the word 'No', over and over again as he fought back. Toby ran around the fight and scuttled into the duct that Charlotte had indicated. It was snug but he could move through it. Toby had only travelled a few yards when he heard the gunshot. It shocked him into stopping, but the sound of the apartment door being broken down forced the adrenaline back into his veins and he moved forward into the safety of the dusted darkness. A thin pathetic wail was issuing from someone back in the flat, but from within his sanctuary Toby could not tell if it was a man or woman's voice.

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He didn't know how he had managed to escape the building. By the time he reached Slowtown, the cotton wool feeling had wrapped itself all the way around his brain and he had trouble remembering stuff. He knew that he had been smart for a while though and when he thought about that it felt like a little part of himself was drowning. Still, Toby knew there was something important that he could do with the flask he had taken. He rode his bike back toward the hospital because he knew that the thing he had to do was there. He shook his head again, trying to shift some of the fog. Gordon had said something about an antidote and when he was 'smart Toby' he thought that he should take it to a doctor or something. But the idea was gone. 'Oh well' Toby thought, 'Gained nothing, lost nothing' as Bernice always said. He missed Bernice. They wouldn't tell him which Slowtown she had been sent to when she had been infected, but he hoped his sister was happy there.

When he reached the bike stands, the Slowgirl from earlier was still loitering. She was touching the handlebars of a pretty bicycle

with a basket and big colourful wheels. One hand was pointlessly trying to depress the bell on the handgrip. Toby looked at her and knew why he had taken the flask. It wasn't smart Toby's idea at all, it was stupid Toby's idea. No not stupid, just Toby's idea. And it was a good one.

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She didn't look frightened anymore. When he had covered her mouth and nose with the open end of the flask, the Slowgirl had started one of those slow motion air raid siren screams, but that was good because that meant she was breathing it in. He backed away then, as his own head had begun to hurt. Toby did not know if it was just the tiring day he had had, or whether Gordon was telling the truth about the gas and that he might just 'stop'. If this was the end, then Toby decided to say a little prayer for Bernice and thank her one last time for looking after him when he was little and being his friend when no-one else would.

And Toby knew, as he watched the Slowgirl cycle past him for the tenth time as she rung the bell and squealed with delight, that today had been worth it.

Isn't every one?

THE END