

**WHEN THE END** of the world came, I had one thought on my mind, and it isn't what you think. I stepped out of my house, glad to be outside and alive, after a week of being cooped up and expecting to die. I drove straight to Walmart, desperately hoping they still had what I needed. The parking lot was virtually empty, and I pulled right up to the front, parking in a handicapped spot, still feeling a reflexive twinge of guilt.

I hurried to the entrance and nearly collided with the glass doors that didn't automatically open like the past hundred times I had been there. With my face an inch from the door, I realized that no one was there to unlock the store. Almost everyone in the country had done as the government said and sealed themselves in their houses, hoping to avoid the virus.

No one would ever come to unlock these doors.

The government spokesmen claimed that as many as a third of the people would survive if they stayed indoors and waited for the virus to go dormant, but I had tracked the stories on the Internet and knew that wasn't true. They just said that to keep people calm and contained. The virus started in China, killing all but 1 in 9,600 and kept nearly that exact ratio as it marched across the globe. If you've read other journals like this, I'm sure you've seen everybody else round that number to 10,000, but I don't round. I'm good with numbers and don't need them to be even.

The government said they had released a counter-virus, but now that was obviously another lie. I can't blame them. It kept people mostly under control. Some countries had erupted in chaos as the virus approached. It was airborne and nothing seemed to stop it.

I stood there wondering what to do. I thought about just smashing the doors with a rock or even my car, but that didn't feel right. This wasn't an apocalyptic wasteland. This was still my beautiful hometown of Tallahassee.

Well, except for the fact that almost everyone else was dead, which I guess is a pretty big exception.

The building was huge. These couldn't be the only entrances, so I drove around back to the loading docks. The big garage doors were all pulled down, and even if they hadn't been locked, I couldn't possibly raise them. But I saw a simple, ordinary door with a handle on it.

I pulled the handle, hoping for luck, but it didn't budge. I wasn't about to complain about bad luck. I was one of the few immune, having survived against enormous odds.

It didn't seem so bad to break the door in the back, but the only thing that could knock a door down was my car, and I wasn't about to damage her. I loved that car, a yellow Ford Mustang convertible that I had named Bella, after my mom, Isabella. I had briefly thought about naming her after my dad, Henry, but the car was definitely a girl.

I had bought Bella with some of the small amount of money I had gotten from a trust fund my parents left me. I had dreamed about having my own car for years, but the trust fund didn't kick in until I turned eighteen. The trust specifically stipulated that I could get a car, so I thought of her as a birthday present from my parents.

I drove to the neighborhood behind Walmart, looking for a car I could use. Vehicles of all kinds lined the streets and filled most every driveway. I wasn't used to this new, empty world, and it still felt wrong to be thinking of taking someone else's property.

I wasn't about to go into the houses to get keys. I didn't want to see what was in there. I wondered when it would start to smell. Most people had sealed their houses, so maybe that would contain it for a while.

After a few minutes of searching, I found a pickup truck with the keys still in it. I imagined the owner had been in a hurry to get inside. There was a very small chance (0.0104 percent, my mind automatically calculated) the owner was still alive, so I forced myself to walk to the door and knock. I wasn't a thief. I knew how much my car meant to me, and I wouldn't do that to someone else.

I started counting to thirty, hoping no one would answer. Please understand that I wasn't hoping the people inside were dead. It was simply habit. Every time I'd ever knocked on a door or called someone on the phone, I'd always hoped that no one answered. I'm not a people person. I like to be alone.

Well, that problem had been solved.

I don't mean to sound so callous, but I had no one who I really cared about to mourn. I had been on my own for a little more than a year after the foster system was promptly done with me on my eighteenth birthday. My most recent foster parents had occasionally checked in on me. They were good people and wanted to make sure I was okay, but I had lived with them for only about six months.

In some ways, I was the perfect person to be left alive like this. The idea of a world with barely any other people didn't scare me. In fact, it sounded sort of nice. I didn't want everybody dead. But I could handle it now that it had happened.

But in another way, a very important way, I was the exact wrong person to survive. On TV and the Internet, everyone had speculated on how people would survive in the depopulated world. They worried about having enough food.

Virtually everywhere in the United States had stores on every street, each teeming with food. There was more food than we could possibly eat in our lifetimes. I was sure of it because I did the math. The canned and dry goods would last years. When those ran out, there were vast fields of crops left and slow, meaty farm animals that would now reproduce unrestricted. The bigger problem would be avoiding being overrun by cows, chickens and pigs.

On the Internet sites I checked, people filled pages with their endless worries of how they would survive the first winter. They made plans to stockpile firewood. Why wouldn't they simply get in their cars and drive to Florida for the winter? Our winters, if they can even be called that, are easily survivable.

Everything people could need would be available in endless supply. Survivors had their pick of cars, and there was enough gas left in the gas station tanks to keep us all driving for more than a century. I've run the numbers on that too. I had a glamorous job at a convenience store, and I knew just how many gallons the huge underground gas tanks held.

We were left in a world of no responsibilities and virtually unlimited resources. Everything a normal person could want sat waiting on unwatched store shelves. But I'm not a normal person.

Food. Water. Air.

That's all an ordinary body requires. From these it produces everything else it needs. Not mine. On that first day, when I stepped out of my house realizing I was one of the few immune, my thoughts were for one thing.

Insulin.

I don't have the easy kind of diabetes that can be handled with proper diet and exercise. My body is self-destructive. Specifically, my immune system, in its glorious overzealousness to defend from outsiders, gets confused and attacks the insulin-producing cells. I imagine the white blood cells feel quite proud of themselves as they slaughter the innocent pancreatic cells that want nothing more than to do their job and be left alone.

Over the years I've learned to live with my condition quite well. I had to if I wanted to survive. The various foster parents I've lived with were all good people, but started out knowing almost nothing about how to help monitor and keep my blood sugar at the right level. I methodically checked it every few hours. I learned just how I would react to each food. What sent my blood sugar rising and how quickly it fell. God forbid if I ever ate more than one slice of pizza. I never went anywhere without at least one syringe in my purse. Insulin was literally my life's blood.

Okay, if there are still grammar Nazis in the future reading this, I realize it wasn't literally my life's blood, but it might as well have been. I couldn't live long without it. I can't tell you how many lectures from doctors and social workers I've had about this.

I reached the thirty count, and no one answered my knock, so I turned to take the truck. I would have to figure out how to knock the Walmart back door in without hurting myself or causing too much damage.

Something made a low sound, and I screamed and nearly tripped. A man's muffled voice called from behind the door, "Is it safe out there?"

For the rest of my life, however short it might be, I would regret what I said next.

"Yes."

**I TURNED BACK** to the house. I hadn't paid attention at first, but now I saw that this house was completely sealed, far more than the others around it. Duct tape, caulk and even what looked like tar covered every conceivable opening or crack so air couldn't get in.

The knob turned, and then the man thumped against the other side of the door, breaking it free of the tape that sealed it. The door sprang open, and a large man stumbled into the sunlight, blinking.

He took a huge gulp of air and said, "Finally."

Something felt wrong. The mathematical part of my brain was trying to tell me something about the odds of finding another immune survivor so quickly, but I was surprised and didn't think things through.

"Is everybody else dead?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Suckers," he said. "The first thing we're gonna do is remove the shutoff timer from the power lines going into the neighborhood."

I had forgotten, but the government had sent people around installing automatic power shutoff timers. I thought it was pretty smart. It would have only taken a few people dying with the stove still on to burn down most of the city.

I was going to watch how he did it, so I could do the same with the timer for my neighborhood. He hopped in his truck, and I followed him in Bella to the neighborhood entrance. It turned out that it was just a clearly labeled off switch, which I could have easily figured out myself.

"I'll be glad to have the air conditioning back. I had it off to because I had all the vents sealed."