

The world is closing in.

It starts small: a smell like garbage fills the room. I can see things in the corner of my vision, flickering but disappearing when I turn to look at them.

Faint traces of the unseen, but every time I try to focus in on them, the room becomes redder. It's like a red shadow, a filter over everything. I hear a ringing in my ears.

Breathe in. Breathe out. I can't think. My vision is filled with crosses. A pile of rotting flesh is taking up the corner of the room.

The space is smaller. I'm falling out of it. Further back. Further back.

"Are you dying? Hey, are you dying?"

It won't shut up.

The voice, the smell, the red, it's all here, I'm fading farther back, collapsing into it -

Beep bip!

The sound of an incoming text message pulls me back. The voices stop.

I stumble over to the nightstand and pick up my phone.

The garbage smell and red filter are still there, but now I'm present and lucid.

*MAVIS [text on phone] : hey ripley, are you doing okay?
still on for lunch?*

I shake away the remaining fog as well as I can and respond.

RIPLEY [text on phone] : yeah, i'm okay. just give me a bit

I put the phone down and walk to the bathroom.

Mavis and I have been friends since high school. She probably knows me better than anyone else.

She's always been good at calming me down, and ever since I contracted the brain bug, she's been taking extra care to look out for me.

I splash some water onto my face. The unease and vague uncomfortable scent are still bugging me, but at least now it's manageable enough for me to drive.

Returning to the central room, which doubles as both my living and bedroom, I change into my tracksuit and gather a few things - phone, keys, pills - before heading out the door.

I take the elevator 24 floors down, all the way to the parking garage a level below ground. Shuffling past teens injecting unknown drugs and homeless people gathered around small fires, I make my way to my van. It's old and beaten, but large enough to get the job done, with "Riptide Courier Service" printed on the side.

The van has been my companion and most important tool since I graduated high school. When college was too expensive and most places weren't hiring, I discovered that a big van, strong arms, and the willingness to do questionably legal shit could make for something liveable.

I really hope the hallucinations don't worsen. Being unable to drive... I don't even wanna think about it.

Shaking away the thought, I hop in, sitting among boxes and crates with various labels on them. Cramped, but hey, I'm used to it.

I don't have to worry about those boxes until later tonight. That's the other nice thing about my job: contract work. More or less making my own schedule.

For now, I'm heading to see Mavis.

[Black screen wipe - scene transition.]

The city flashes by me, brown and grey blurs of concrete. By night it will be darker, but also more colourful, with billboards and neon lights contrasting against the black. Nighttime is almost beautiful here, but Mavis would know more about that than me.

People shuffle by, mostly as grey as their surroundings. The streets seem emptier than they did before the epidemic. Thousands are gone, either dead or holed up in quarantines.

I pass by a mass of people in plague doctor masks, handing out flyers. They stand on this street corner every day, desperately trying to get the uninfected to listen. Despite their outrageous getup, I think most people have gotten used to their presence by now. Now they're uninteresting.

Shifting onto the highway, I pass under a large billboard for Alan & Wagner Pharmaceuticals. It shows a smiling woman holding a bottle of pills, with the slogan *Don't let your body be betrayed* written in shining letters underneath.

Their billboards are everywhere. They have a massive tower in the centre of downtown, plastered with LCD screens showing ads and videos of scientists hard at work.

They seem to be working on drugs for everything. Everything except a cure.

[Black screen wipe - new scene]

Mavis and her roommate have a much nicer apartment than mine. It's still far from high-end, but at least it has bedrooms.

I open the door with my copy of the key, which Mavis had insisted I take. Inside, I see her and her roommate, Colm, sitting at a hastily made table.

MAVIS: Hey, Ripley!

COLM: Hi.

MAVIS: We've got sandwiches!

They sure do. All sorts are laid out on the table.

MAVIS: It's not much.

RIPLEY: It's way better than eating cup noodles every day.

COLM: Hear, hear.

MAVIS: We've got tuna party sandwiches, bologna, grilled cheese, egg salad, BLT, roast beef -

RIPLEY: No way! Isn't beef super expensive?

COLM: I got a bonus for finishing my last project. We decided to splurge.

Colm is a programmer. I don't know much about what exactly he does, but he's apparently good at it.

Mavis met him online a few years ago. When Colm moved to the city to get better work, the two of them decided to live together. He's nice enough, if a little distant. I usually don't see him often, since he tends to be at the office for around 12 hours a day.

RIPLEY: Man, this looks delicious. Thanks.

MAVIS: No problem! Take a seat!

I do, grabbing a roast beef sandwich. Each bite seems to explode with flavour - when's the last time I had beef?

COLM: Mavis, you're a great cook.

MAVIS: It's nothing, just some sandwiches.

MAVIS: Besides, I've had a bit more time since getting fired. Silver linings and all that.

RIPLEY: Man, that really sucks.

MAVIS: It was inevitable. Most grocery chains had already switched to entirely automated service. I was lucky to get that job in the first place.

COLM: At least this gives you more time for your art.

Mavis laughs sadly.

MAVIS: Yeah, you're right. But it's unfortunate that I can't pay my part of the rent anymore.

MAVIS: People like us can't really afford to buy art, and the upper classes are looking for prestige more than anything.

RIPLEY: You have an art degree.

MAVIS: Not like that does me any good.

She's still smiling as she speaks. Mavis has been an optimist ever since we met. She always seems to find silver linings, or at least be able to smile in the face of misfortune.

Once when we were younger, she couldn't afford her estrogen prescription anymore. She was paying for it herself because her family wasn't exactly accepting, but she'd miscalculated her savings and had to stop taking hormone replacement therapy only a few months after she started.

I'd been so concerned for her at the time. Watching the changes she'd made dissipate, and knowing that she didn't have any support at home. When I mentioned it, she'd just smile and shrug, saying "what can you do?"

She's always been like that. She's back on HRT, and has been for years, but I still can't help but worry sometimes about what she's hiding behind her shrugs and smiles.

MAVIS: So are you working tonight, Ripley?

RIPLEY: Yeah. I have a few deliveries scheduled, but no pick-ups. They're kind of scattered across town.

MAVIS: And you're feeling well enough to do them?

RIPLEY: Of course.

I brush her off. She really doesn't have to worry about me.

RIPLEY: So, Colm, haven't seen you in a while. You're not working today?

COLM: Oh, I am. I'm just working from home for the next while.

COLM: They don't want me in the office since I disclosed that I've been infected.

COLM: Concerns about contagion and all.

MAVIS: Oh, that's such bullshit. Once you're on the antiviral and progression has stopped, you're not contagious anymore.

COLM: I know that. You know that. Hell, even they probably know that.

COLM: But you just can't stop the fear. It's always "what if", what if there's something we don't know...

MAVIS: It's nonsense. As you said, it's just fearmongering.

COLM: I mean, even with that aside, I think they're worried about having someone symptomatic in the office.

COLM: Like, what if I have an episode? What if I get violent?

COLM: I'm too much of a liability.

We fall into silence. There's really not much to say to that. The brain bug causes disorientation and psychosis, eventually killing you if its progression isn't stopped by the antiviral. Even with the meds, whatever stage you've developed isn't reversible.

So long as Colm and I have our medication, it won't kill us. But without a cure, we'll have to deal with psychosis forever.

Colm and I don't really talk about it much. It's something we have in common, but it's not fun to dwell on. We're both doomed - that's all there is to it.

MAVIS: Oh, I forgot, I have lemonade in the fridge. Does anybody want some?

She tries so desperately to lighten the mood. I nod and take another bite of my sandwich. It's better to savour what I can.

[Screen wipe to black - scene change]

My last delivery for the night is a whole lot of crates, to be sent to an apartment in a middle-end residential tower.