

The Overlooked Type of Life Changers

Rue Lalonde groaned as she pressed her ear against the holographic screen for the second time. “Scanning... Access denied.” She sighed impatiently at the machine and tried again. ‘Scanning...’ Rue thought while the machine loaded. The technology in her apartment was so quaint! Ear lobe scanning was used as a security device 30 years before! Ever since DNA scanners by HJG companies replaced the megagiant Apple in the 21st century, HJG security technology was considered an essential asset of homes all over. Rue’s mother was saving up for one. *Thank goodness.* An abrupt ‘Access granted’ interrupted her reverie.

Rue entered the dingy living area to find her 10-year-old brother, Finnick, staring into space on the couch. The technology he was using was very modern. Called Television Contacts, the contraptions were invented to replace media devices without the need of surgical implants. One must simply insert one into each eye and look straight ahead to see 3D figures among many other things. They were just holograms, of course, but they seemed so real! Unfortunately, they were rather expensive and Rue’s family could not afford them. However, Rue’s friend, the daughter of a wealthy merchandising giant, had given Rue hers because she had received a newer model. Rue let Finnick keep them because he wanted them more than her. Besides, Rue had her own holographic e-sheet. Rue flopped down and turned it on. News was usually boring, so she began to surf channels but suddenly stopped.

Warning for Whitehorse citizens, the headlines read. Rue continued to read, poring over the words. A Spanish influenza outbreak has just been confirmed. If you suspect you have it, contact your doctor immediately. For your safety, stay home. All schools in this area are closed until further notice. The symptoms include fever, nausea, aches, dark facial spots, and difficulty

breathing. Don't panic... Rue's breathing quickened as the rest of the world melted away.

Questions piled into her mind. *How can that be?* She tapped Finnick on the shoulder impatiently.

He reluctantly slipped the contacts out and shook his head, dazed.

“What?” He looked annoyed and concerned at the same time.

“There is an outbreak of Spanish Influenza for Whitehorse!”

“What?” Finnick shook his head quickly. Still in the living room. He closed his eyes and didn't open them for a while. When he did, Rue was still there. “Wait, what is that, anyway?”

Just then, the door opened and their mother, stooping from the burdens of the heavy grocery bags, entered the room. The children ran toward her and began clamoring, both trying to fill her in on their day. Their words mixed together and created a giant jumble of confusion.

“Wait, one at a time! Tell me while we unload these groceries,” she paused, contemplating how to tell her children about the Spanish Influenza outbreak.

As they put the groceries away, Rue's mother explained to Finnick what the Spanish Flu was. She continued while sanitising the containers, washing their hands, and eating dinner. It seemed like Finnick would never run out of questions! Finally, he quieted down and fell asleep. Even after the apartment was quiet, Rue lay in her bed, thinking. She had no doubt that two rooms away her lonely mother was doing the same, thinking about how another disease had taken her husband.

Rue was worried. Would it be a replay of her father's death all over again? Her father held the family together. When, he died from the flu, everything fell apart. They had to move to the tiny apartment, leaving everything in Seattle. Their mother became tired and weak. When she spoke, there was always a hint of depression, showing she still hadn't gotten over his death. She

became stringent in her thinking that disaster could be around every corner to target her family. But when it came, she would be prepared. She made sure her children received vaccines for every sickness possible. When they bought groceries, they would sanitize the containers and lids. They washed their hands constantly and dried them with antiseptic-induced hand dryers. As they both became tangled up in their train of thought, mother and daughter slept fitfully.

Rue awoke to the noise of her mother leaving for work. She stayed in her bed, not wanting to wake her brother, who muttering in his sleep. Her mother peered at them through the sliver of light at the door, worried lines etched into her face. As soon as she heard the door close, Rue crept out of bed and tiptoed past her brother. She froze. She noticed dark spots on Finn's face. Rue remembered the warning from last night. She felt Finn's forehead. It was hot. Burning hot. What could she do? Rue pulled out her earpiece to contact her mother. They had a quick conversation before Rue's mother called the doctor.

The doctor appeared on the e-sheet screen with an air of importance. Even from miles away, they could almost feel his presence. He asked for a close-up of the spots, and checked Finnick's temperature with a body scanner. Rue decided she did not mind his arrogance much until he announced, "I'm sorry, but Finnick has the Spanish Influenza. There is nothing we can do but stay away from him." After giving the usual recommendations about fluids and rest, the doctor logged off.

Their mother rushed all over the apartment, she paced back and forth the hallway, peeking through the doorway where Finnick lay hot with fever, moaning about his headaches. This went on all day and through the night, as his groans grew louder. Rue, like her mother, had

done away with self-control and paced in the living area. Her eyes overflowed with tears as she began to picture her brother's grave. She quickly dismissed the thought.

At 2:00 AM, the world ended for Rue's mother. Her son had followed her husband's path, leaving her daughter and herself. But how was she supposed to comfort her daughter if she was mourning herself? So she stopped trying to help her daughter. No matter what Ms. Lalonde did, she couldn't protect Finnick, so how could she protect Rue? Kara Lalonde lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling, her daughter the only thing separating her from death. Soon, she began to let sleep win over her but, one question remained. *I have exercised all caution. How did Finnick die?*

Things weren't going well for Rue either. Tears streamed down her face as she watched raindrops splatter against her SmartWindow. It kept out intruders but couldn't block a virus. She knew Finnick wouldn't want her to spend the whole day mourning. Reluctantly, she wiped her tears and turned on her holographic device. A newscaster reported, "... Let's come back to our infectious disease expert, Mr. Marshall."

Rue listened. "...Good news, Jerry. This is a serious outbreak. We have found the source. Some massive ice banks that have been melting uncovered human corpses who died from the Spanish Influenza outbreak of 1918. Their germs were released when the ice melted. We have also found that a staggering amount of daily commuters who caught the flu were in HoverBuses. Stay safe by not coming in direct contact with those who have the disease. Tight spaces will..." The man's deep voice tuned out. Rue signed off and, eyelids drooping, surrendered to sleep.

Rue was awakened by coughing and gasps. Her mother! She raced to the other bedroom. Her mother took no notice of her presence. Rue nervously inched closer to the bed, afraid of what she might see, and her mother struggled to sit up. The same spots that had marked Finnick

decorated her face. She smiled weakly at Rue and uttered, “No matter what happens, stay safe.” Rue grabbed her hand, fearing the moment would be over too soon. As the hand grew limp and the breath stopped, Rue’s eyes shrouded with tears they couldn’t feel.

For the first time in days, Rue went out and sat on a bench and watched the news, now a daily routine for her. “...We learned that the technology sensation Television Contacts assisted in the spreading of the virus. Unknowingly, wearers shared the unsanitized pairs which spread the disease. I received information that the outbreak has not spread to other provinces and is under control. Still exercise vigilance...”

The contacts! When Rue heard the news, her head collapsed into her hands in a blur of tears. She was the one that marked Finnick for death, not the spots! She had killed her brother.

Rue typed her essay rapidly. With satisfaction, she wrote the last sentences to the paragraph. *I lost my brother and mom to the disease. My best friend is gone, too. Some lives will never be the same because of diseases. They aren't just illnesses, they are life changers. I will never be the same. Just think. When you go outside today, is it the same as it was two months ago?*

It isn't. It will never be.