

The Mockingbird's Song

A mockingbird flies above me, soaring through the sky on feathered wings, drifting on the wind, and finally perching on the branch of a tall birch tree. Its sweet song rings through the spring air when all of a sudden a laser gun sounds. The innocent mockingbird falls to the ground, the last note of its song dying with it.

I awoke with a start, the dream fading from my mind. I glanced around the room and saw my NetBook open to the last page of the old classic *To Kill A Mockingbird*. One line stood out from the rest of the page, "Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?" I re-read the excerpt, realizing how much I felt like a small mockingbird in a place where no one would give me a chance to sing my song.

I twirl the containment center tracker band around my wrist. Pressing the red button on the bracelet, my holograph information page flashes in front of me:

Name: Beck Cooper, Age: 16 years, Patient Number: 3127, Reason for Containment: Bipolarity.

This is the summary of my existence. No one else in the containment center cares much about anything else. The containment center is a quarantine facility for people with sub-standard genomes. In 2061 genetic testing is commonplace, and genetic alterations are performed on every fetus in order to ensure that the baby will not be born with any

defects. Each fetus is tested for any genetic abnormalities, and if an undesired trait is found, it is replaced with a more desirable one. After these genetic alterations, every new child is considered perfect and healthy, with a guaranteed life of longevity. However, occasionally a parent will refuse genetic alterations or a malfunction in the genetic recoding occurs, and their child is born with a disability or predisposition to a disease. These children, misfits if you will, are taken at birth and placed in containment centers to prevent them from mixing with genetic purebreds and contaminating the gene pool. The parents of these children do not resist the demands of the containment centers. If they refuse to release their child, they will be denied insurance, medical care, and an education for any other children in their family. Subject to this duress, most parents feel compelled to hand over their disabled child and any rights to them. I am one of those children, with a predisposition to bipolarity. I am a mockingbird who is flightless, songless, and lost in the cloudy skies of genetic discrimination.

My tracker band beeps and a holographic notification image materializes in the air. The containment center supervisor's face appears in front of me. "Report to the laboratory immediately, your assistance is required." My supervisor's demand is curt and sudden. It is clear that no one cares about causing an intervention to my schedule. Once each containment center patient finishes their basic education, they are given small jobs in the containment center. I work in the Genetic Engineering Experimental Laboratory and assist the biomedical engineers with small jobs and clean up procedures. The containment center monitors all of my activities so I am available for any task they need

completed. To them I am disposable and expendable, nothing more than the results of a failed laboratory experiment, completely devalued, and utterly worthless.

As soon as I open the laboratory door, the atmosphere of anxiety and chaos overwhelms my depressing thoughts. Bioengineers, physicians, and multiple unfamiliar doctors are huddled in a large group, nervous and worried. The insta-news player is turned up to full volume, and I hear the newscaster's voice blaring:

“URGENT HEALTH NOTIFICATION: World population stricken by mysterious epidemic. An un-explained virus sweeps across Earth, attacking the genetically perfected immune systems of our purebred population. Since the perfected immune systems of our genetically altered people are not susceptible to any known diseases, this new virus is causing pandemonium throughout the world. Not only is the population susceptible to this unknown virus, but it is deadly and quickly spreading. The cause of the virus is unknown, and there is no cure or vaccine available to counter its deadly effects. If no cure for the virus is found, the entire human population could become extinct in a matter of months. The Universal Department of Health has issued a Code Red Epidemic Warning. To retard the spread of this deadly virus, health administrators suggest avoiding public facilities as much as possible. Please stay connected to an insta-news source to receive information of any further developments.”

The newscaster's voice cuts off, and the room is silent. I sit in shock, anxiety forming a pit in my stomach. I force my attention back to my surroundings, again

noticing the large group of scientists immersed in a discussion. Unnoticed, I join their huddle, absorbing as much scientific information as possible. I want to know everything I can about this deadly force that is claiming lives all over the world.

The empty laboratory is silent, the air stale with desperation and exhaustion. I sit down at the empty lab station, scanning over the scientists' papers and Netbooks left strewn across the tabletop. I pick up one abandoned Netbook. On the screen is a list of the patients the virus has already killed. As I scroll through the list I see one thing in common with each patient. They are all identified as purebreds. I tap the screen for a document search, and type the phrase "non-purebred virus victims" into the small text box that appears. The device immediately returns a negative response, "None found". All of the patients on the fatality list are purebreds. Slowly the pieces of the puzzle are beginning to fit together. If all of the victims of this epidemic are purebreds, could their genetic modifications be the reason for their susceptibility to the virus? With this hypothesis in mind, I begin to sift through the papers lying at the lab station. I'm searching for the results of the scientists' Component Analysis Test, an advanced lab analysis that synthesizes what a substance or virus is composed of. I find the test results in a stack of meaningless other lab analyses, its information deemed worthless. But one scientist's trash may be a non-purebred's treasure. I peruse the information on the bright white sheet of paper. The virus has a similar composition to the substance that is used during genetic alterations to fixate more desirable alleles into a fetus in replacement for undesirable alleles. I grab a Netbook and conduct a ScholarSearch on the substance. My findings display the following: The substance is commonly referred to as "allele glue".

It has a seemingly harmless composition, but has recently been found to react with the proteins of the body that regulate cell growth and division. When the allele glue comes into contact with this protein, it reacts and disrupts the production of white blood cells. The reaction also produces a new substance - the deadly virus. When the production of white blood cells stops and the new virus begins to spread, the victim can be dead in a matter of weeks. This would explain why there have been no non-purebred virus victims, because our alleles are not fixated with the glue. In essence, the virus destroying the purebreds' perfect immune systems is really their own genetically altered genes.

Epilogue

Since my discovery of the virus's origin, a cure has been developed, ringing a death knell to the epidemic. The most difficult part of my discovery wasn't the scientific process. I had learned the critical thinking involved in the scientific method from years of observation, while I performed menial cleaning tasks in the laboratory. Convincing society to accept what I had done as a valid scientific discovery was the real challenge. Before the epidemic, no one believed it was possible that a genetic non-purebred could do anything worthwhile. My scientific contributions defied discriminatory stereotypes against the genetically disabled. My discovery was more than just a contribution to science. It taught society two invaluable lessons. Foremost, we cannot create perfection. Even the seemingly flawless genomes of the purebred population were fallible, as evidenced by the epidemic. Secondly, genetic testing can measure many things, but it cannot gauge a person's willpower, perseverance, and desire. It is these qualities that

will take us forward in life, not a perfected genome. Science does not define who we are, because no matter what someone says you will be, a person can accomplish anything they set their mind to. We cannot use genetic testing as a gun, because if we shoot the mockingbird, we will never have a chance to hear the beautiful song it had to sing.