

CARLTON GARDNER



TOWN WITHOUT CONSCIENCE

a Short Story

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Vaccine

The vaccine had promised a miracle. Our town, a close-knit tapestry of familiar faces and shared histories, had embraced it with a collective sigh of relief. For a brief, blissful moment, it seemed like we'd outsmarted this new and aggressive flu strain. The initial human trials had revealed no abnormalities, and none of the test subjects exhibited any of the symptoms now appearing in our town. The vaccine's creators were baffled, scrambling to determine whether another contamination was at play. But while they searched for answers, our town changed.

Cracks began to show. Subtle at first, like hairline fractures in a windshield. I saw Mrs. Gable, usually so gentle, openly sneer at her crying child in the grocery store, a cold, almost pleasurable glint in her eye. Old Man Hemlock, who'd never harmed a fly, deliberately backed his truck over his neighbor's dog, then let out a sharp, joyful bark of laughter that still echoes in my nightmares. The town's moral compass hadn't just cracked; it had shattered, and the pieces were silently dissolving into dust. No one seemed to notice. No one but me. The weight of that

solitary awareness felt like a physical ache in my chest.

I was a doctor, sworn to protect life, to heal. When Harold Jacobs stormed into my office, his face a roadmap of raw grief and incandescent rage, I barely had time to brace myself before he slammed his wife's autopsy report onto my desk. "Cancer?!" he spat, his voice a guttural rasp, thick with unshed tears. "You gave her a clean bill of health two weeks ago! No signs, no symptoms! And now the coroner says she had cancer? What the hell is going on, Doc?" His eyes, red-rimmed and bloodshot, pierced through me, demanding an answer I didn't have. The helplessness was a bitter taste in my mouth.

So, I went to find one. Dr. Langston, the coroner, met me in his office, his face a pale, hollowed mask of sleepless nights. When I pressed him, his eyes darted around like a trapped animal's before he shut the door, the click of the lock echoing like a death knell. He leaned in, whispering, "They're watching. But you're a doctor—you deserve to know. It's not just her. It's everyone. The vaccine... it's changed them. They're losing something—something fundamental, something that makes us us. And those who question it... they disappear." The words hit me like a physical blow, a cold dread seeping into my bones. I didn't want to believe him. Every fiber of my being screamed for it to be a lie. But I had already seen too much, felt too much of the world tilting on its axis.

Our town, chosen for early vaccination trials because our demographics were a perfect mirror of the country's, had become ground zero. The first to receive the vaccine were essential workers—police officers, firefighters, healthcare staff. They were also the first to change. The police force, once familiar faces I'd known for years, had transformed overnight. Now, silent, unfamiliar men in crisp, new uniforms patrolled

the streets, their eyes utterly devoid of empathy, like polished stones. Those who showed early signs of the change were being quarantined, not to contain a virus, but to be studied, dissected. The CDC, FDA, and private labs were working feverishly, locked in a desperate race against an enemy they didn't understand. But the town had been sealed off. No news. No communication. A complete blackout, as if we'd been erased from the map.

Then came the mutations. I saw firsthand how the faces of some of the first affected twisted into grotesque parodies of humanity—jaws distended, eyes sunken and black like charcoals, skin stretched taut over newly prominent bone structures. Violence escalated at an alarming, sickening rate. Every scream, every shattered window, every body left sprawled in the street chipped away at my sanity. I remained on constant guard, obsessively checking my reflection, scrutinizing every fleeting thought, every subtle twitch, terrified of seeing the change begin in myself, in my family. I buried myself in the lab, assisting the research teams, clinging to the familiar comfort of science, tending to the few patients who still sought me out. But they were fewer and fewer each day, a dwindling testament to the world we'd lost.

My wife, Deborah... I tried to keep her inside, a fragile bird against the gathering storm. When she went out, I clung to her side, my heart a drumbeat of fear. But I couldn't control the subtle shifts, the creeping detachment. I began to notice her indifference to the horrors unfolding around us—the unnoticed body left sprawled in the street, an elderly man pushed down a flight of stairs with no one rushing to help. She never mentioned them. Never reacted. She'd just step over a fallen body to admire a blooming rose, and the sheer, casual horror of it made my stomach churn. I was too afraid to ask if she even saw them,

terrified of confirming the emptiness I already felt growing between us.

I knew then that I had to get her out. “We have to go, now!” I choked out, my voice raw with desperation, my hands fumbling as I stuffed supplies into a bag. She resisted, her brow furrowed in annoyance rather than fear. “I can’t leave without my mother. She’s visiting Aunt Mae and Uncle Gary. We have to bring them.” Her calm insistence was another knife twist. I knew it was suicidal, but I agreed, a chilling dread already coiling in my gut. We drove through darkened streets, past shadows that moved like people but no longer resembled neighbors or friends—their eyes blank, their movements jerky, almost mechanical.

We arrived at Aunt Mae’s home, and for a dizzying, disorienting moment, the nightmare outside vanished. The warm scent of freshly baked cake filled the air, pulling me into a desperate, fragile hope. A crackling fireplace bathed the cozy living room in flickering light, and Aunt Mae and Uncle Gary sat comfortably, their laughter blending with the soft hum of an old jazz tune on the radio. Deborah’s mother sipped tea, nodding along to their conversation, utterly oblivious, as though nothing in the world was amiss. The normalcy was a seductive lie, and I wanted so desperately to cling to it, to believe we could rewind time.

Then Aunt Mae rose and went into the kitchen. I watched her, a knot of anxiety tightening in my chest, a desperate prayer on my lips. She returned, placing the freshly baked cake on the table between Uncle Gary and myself. For a second, she seemed to freeze, her gaze distant. Then, with a sudden, jarring force, the cake pan slammed onto the table.

Bang.

Aunt Mae’s knuckles whitened around the pan’s rim as she lifted it, her muscles corded, and slammed it down again, harder

this time. Her eyes locked on Uncle Gary, empty of recognition, full of something ancient and horrifyingly primal. **Bang. BANG.** I opened my mouth, a scream tearing in my throat, just as she raised the pan high, ready to bring it down on him. Without thinking, pure instinct overriding fear, I lunged. We crashed to the floor, the cake forgotten, shattered fragments of normalcy scattering around us. I pinned her down, shouting, "It's the vaccine! You don't know what you're doing!" My voice was hoarse, desperate, a plea against the encroaching madness.

But nobody reacted. Not Uncle Gary, still sipping his tea, his eyes vacant. Not my wife, not her mother, continuing their pleasant, meaningless conversation, as if nothing was happening, as if they couldn't see the grotesque struggle on the floor. My blood ran cold. They were all affected!

I felt something warm and wet against my hand. My fingers gripped a knife. Blood, thick and coppery, seeped from a deep, jagged wound across Aunt Mae's throat. I stared at her, her eyes now vacant, her face a mask of something other than human. The knife, slick with her life, slipped from my numb fingers. The crimson stain on my hand mirrored the horror of what I'd done. It couldn't be real. I wasn't like them. Or was I?



About the Author

Note from Carlton

The unsettling events of this story first unfolded not on paper, but in a vivid dream in the mid-1970s. It came to me shortly after the nationwide rollout of the Swine Flu vaccine, a time when I'd also just seen the very first episode of *Quincy, M.E.*, starring Jack Klugman. Perhaps those two disparate influences merged in my sleeping mind to birth this nightmare. The true origins of our deepest fears often remain a mystery.

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