

The Narcissus Plague

a short story by Lisa Goldstein

Lisa Goldstein writes...

I wrote 'The Narcissus Plague' after a week where everyone I met seemed to talk about nothing but themselves, and I began to wonder if there was some sort of plague going around.

The man in the tollbooth had the Narcissus Plague. "We moved when I was nine," he said earnestly. I held my dollar out to him, watched it sway in the breeze. "My dog never did get used to the new house. One day he got out and chased the mailman up a tree. No one was home, and the neighbors had to call the police ..."

Finally he took my money and I sped away. A minute later I looked in my rearview mirror and saw that the car after me was still trapped at the booth. A narrow escape, I thought. I checked my oxygen mask and surgical gloves and hurried toward the newspaper office where I work.

I parked in the lot and rode the elevator up to my floor. "Hi, Amy, how are you?" my editor Thomas asked. This is the only way we greet each other now. It's meant to assure other people that we can still take an interest in them, that we don't have the plague.

"Fine, how are you?" I said. He followed me down the hall toward my cubicle.

"Hi, guys," my co-worker Gary said, heading toward his desk. "I stayed up all last night working on that article you wanted, Thomas."

We turned and watched him go. If it had been anyone else in the office we would have worried about the plague, but Gary has talked about nothing but himself for as long as any of us can remember.

"Listen -- I've got an assignment for you," Thomas said. "Someone at one of the labs says she's come up with a cure."

"A cure? You're kidding me," I said.

"I'm not, but it's possible she is. That's what I want you to find out. Her name's Dr. Leila Clark."

He gave me the doctor's address and phone number, and I hurried to my desk to call. To my annoyance an answering machine came on. "Hello, you've reached the office of Dr. Leila Clark. We can't answer your call right now, but if you leave your name and number I'll get back to you just as soon as I go visit my boyfriend. He said he was going to break up with that other woman, but I bet he hasn't done it. He's been saying he'll break up with her since last winter, when I caught them at our favorite restaurant together --"

I hung up. The chances for a cure did not look good.

The lab turned out to be on the other side of the park from the

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