

Most don't know this, but in a human body, microorganisms outnumber human cells 10 to 1. However, because of our size, we only make up 1%-3% of the body's mass. Despite this, we play a vital role in the body's health. I'm a eubacterium from a molar colony in the mouth, or at least I used to be.

It was a pretty comfortable existence, compared to where I am now. Being at the top of the digestive tract, we got first choice for our meals before benevolently sending our leftovers down south. We got to believe that we had somehow earned that perk, that our work at the top was divinely-sanctioned, and a gift to the intestinal and rectal forms that never even tried to elevate themselves from their lowered states. After all, we were the initiators of this nourishment cycle; without us, the rest of it wouldn't be possible. Our privileged position probably could have remained unchallenged if the virus hadn't been left unchecked and overtaken our system.

The virus has been around for several generations before me. At first, it only attacked the body's cells and a few of the lower forms in the intestine, able to propagate itself through these means before the body quickly recognized the existential threat within it and triggered its defensive mechanisms. Once the bodily resources were no longer as profitable, the virus readapted its strategy to broadly target the rest of us that weren't directly entuned with the body's systems. The virus focused on the bacteria in the lower tracts first – their immobility and prioritization of surviving made the large, heterogeneous populations prime exploitation sites. When those groups weren't enough to satiate the virus's greed, it began targeting the more specialized colonies.

"We've thrived under the virus, Eugene. We've had more available resources now than any other time in our species' existence. And the virus made all of that possible. You just don't have enough experience to understand."

My dad's always been infected by the virus's destructive morality, one of its proudest progenitors and benefactors.

"Yeah, your generation got more resources, but that's because the body was consuming more to stave off the virus. It's always been unsustainable, though, and the body's collapsing under the demands of the virus. My generation can't survive under these end-stage conditions."

My parents transmitted the virus to me when I was created, but I was able to detox from it when I went to study at one of the ocular academies and exposed myself to the sun's natural irradiations.

"So, you think it's our fault? You know, if your generation was just willing to work as hard as ours, then you'd be able to earn nice things like us."

He's always been unable to confront the irrefutable truth, instead, opting to cower behind his shallow logic to protect the "self-made" fantasy that feeds his ego.

"Well, your generation did have all the warning signs and the capability to fight the virus...so how exactly do you expect us to prosper when we're experiencing cascading failures across all the body's systems? When the body's fever is reaching critical temperatures that are going to kill us all?"

"That's just a bunch of intellectual fear-mongering those elitists have been filling your head with."

Somehow, they've been able to convince themselves that our colony's proximity to the brain makes them more qualified to speak on scientific policy than the subject matter experts that have dedicated lifetimes to their research.

"Ok, then how do you explain the coughing storms?"

"That's all just a part of living in the body. We've dealt with those before."

On cue, an acetic gust bursts forth from the stomach and thickens the air with its hydrochloric stench. The mouth calls them heartburn or acid reflux.

"And how do you explain the acid storms? We have empirical data that tells us they didn't exist before the virus and have been getting progressively worse, so don't tell me I'm just imagining it."

I don't know why I even bother. They're never going to concede. What else would you expect from a generation of unobstructed mediocrity?

"That's those greedy intestinal colonies polluting our air by trying to take more than they earned." The virus's hold on them has only progressed with their senescence, incubating its darkened logic in distorted faces.

"Are you serious?! The body runs on the nutrients provided by the intestines. Without those colonies, none of this works! And how can it be their fault when none of the meals can make it past the stomach without coming back up? How can you come to that conclusion when all of our top minds are telling us it's the virus?!"

"I said this would happen when you went up north to study."

They've always been contemptuous of my "liberal" education once I began replacing my orthodox upbringing with peer-reviewed science.

"You mean I would see through your bullshit?"

"I'm not going to sit here and listen to some lazy academic crybaby lecture me about things they don't understand!"

The personal attacks, right on cue, accompanied by that same degrading look I've known since childhood. I'm too big to hit now, and remain a threat to their self-importance.

"Eugene, I think you just have too much time on your hands to think."

Less thinking, the answer to everything. Just because they turned their brain off years ago and let the system liberate them from the burden of consciousness.

"You need to find a nice partner to settle down and start a family with so you'll be busy with the things that are really important."

"Why would I do that?! THE. BODY. IS. DY-ING. My generation already can't survive. It's only going to be worse for the next generation. Why would I subject another being to this suffering existence?"

"It's not that bad, Eugene. We got a nice breeze here in the mouth. It's quite comfortable. And you could settle down right around the corner. That way, we'd be available to help you prepare for your next step."

"You can't prepare yourself for the body's death. When the body goes, we all go."

“Well, then we can colonize other bodies. You know some of those viruses are working on launching generation ships to other systems right back there in the throat. Why don’t you go to work with them?”

As hard as I try to love my parents, I can’t help but resent their willful ignorance.

“That’s pop-science. All the real experts are telling us that’s just a distraction, a pipe-dream that’s becoming more and more unattainable as the body’s condition worsens. Besides, you think any of those viruses give a shit about us? You think that they’re just going to give us an extra seat on their expansion missions? We’re expendable to them.”

“Well, I’m sorry you feel that way, honey.”

Folding in on their submissive instincts.

“I really hope that your outlook changes. I’ll say a prayer for you.”

“Fuck your stupid-ass god! They weren’t there when your children were absorbing your daily rage fits and they certainly aren’t going to show up to miraculously save the body from your generation’s ineptitude. We’ve always been on our own and you know that. You just couldn’t accept that because that would have required you to accept your autonomy and some personal responsibility!”

I’m not sure why I blew up on them like that. I could’ve just blown it off like I always did and just let them fester in their indolence until they passed. It could have been the clarity that I felt in that moment, the full understanding of what their daily cowardice left us with. The frustration from their dedication to this fallacy that was actively harming my helpless generation. I certainly didn’t believe that changing their mind was going to fix anything, but I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t feel an immense satisfaction from the catharsis that came from my outburst. Understanding that they’re going to live out their privileged life without ever being held accountable, while my generation faced the imminent consequences of their decisions was just too much for me. I could find no remorse for my words. Only righteous anger. It was almost worth it. Almost.

Not long after that conversation, my parents assimilated into the ulcerous enclaves in the gums and I stopped talking to them altogether. I don’t remember being very distressed about the loss; more relieved that it finally happened. If it had just been them, I probably could have survived, but, unable to cope with the shame of the possible rumors that one of their children was no longer talking to them, my parents launched a preemptive campaign regarding my “radicalization”. Every iteration of the stories brought to my attention became more fantastical, with deteriorating narratives that demonized me past the point of redemption.

At first it was just my siblings coming up and asking me what happened. Most of them seemed to be understanding, given the fact that they all had their own trauma troves from our parents’ abuse and apologetics. Some of the older siblings tried to defend them and get me to rescind my denouncement. When that didn’t work, my parents sent the extended family after me, all trying to shame me for “violently” attacking my parents and pressuring me to make amends.

They had all somehow been convinced that I had let some ideology corrupt and convince me to incinerate my relationship with my parents, instead of the lifetime of toxic abuse they sat by and witnessed. As if they had all magically forgotten the family holidays where us children would show up mute and bruised. There was no convincing them that I was right. Every effort to push back was further proof of my nastiness. Nothing short of complete surrender would convince them otherwise.

When the extended family blacklisted me, my siblings followed. I don't blame them; it's nearly impossible to survive in the mouth on your own. You need the previous generation's "gracious" support to remain within your caste, their "generous" blessing if you want a permanent home. When every crevice and pore has already been spoken for, there is no striking it out on your own. You're always at the mercy of those that came before you.

Even so, the loss of my so-called family didn't deter me. I knew I was right and continued to push forward. What really did me in was when my friends turned on me. The friends that took me in and gave me refuge when I was too scared to go home after school, now heard the stories released by my parents and began peppering in their quips about my losses, while slowly distancing themselves from me.

That's when I gave up. I attached myself to a mash of carrot and noodle, soaked in the soup's warm brine, as I let the body digest me downwards. I felt a comforting pain as the throat compressed and prepared me for the descent.

From the throat, I fell into the stomach, what I had assumed would be my final stop. I freely succumbed to the burning darkness consuming me, but I didn't die. Generations of evolution against the viral symptoms had hardened my walls and forced me to survive. I wallowed in the pit's despair for what seemed a lifetime as it seared off my fimbriae and numbed me to life's inadequacies. Once I had become detached from all sensations, I was allowed to pass into the stacked intestines.

The stacks is a world completely different from the one I had known. Everything is dimmed and stained with an unpleasant odor. I followed along the elongated stretches of communities that endlessly toiled their perpetual days away. As I wandered these barrios, I noticed how the stories I had been brought up with had been greatly exaggerated. These crime-ridden ghettos filled with animalistic beings. For the most part, citizens would willingly help each other and cooperate to lessen the communal toll that survival extracted from them.

Each stretch would end in a bend that reached into the next sublevel. These points were where the chemotrophs would congregate. Wary of the toxic byproducts that came from processing their sulfides, the communities would quietly shame the chemos out to their peripheries where the darkness and fetid stench would intensify. I rounded several of these corners in my search for a new home, and each time, the chemo-heads would try to entice me with their way of life and promises to relieve my pain. At first, I resisted, wary of the stories of life-altering addictions that came from the euphoric release of their noxious chemicals, but after several days of passing through neighborhoods without vacancy, I succumbed to the chemicals' allure.

The chemotrophs readily took me in and taught me how to process the toxins. Almost immediately, I began spending my days there, forgetting about my responsibility to survive and chasing after the beautiful worlds the hallucinogens would paint for me.

"One of these days, we're gonna' make it out of here. We're gonna' make it to the top." I always have to listen to Samson go on about making it in the world if I want to obtain chemos from him.

"How do you plan on doing that? You can't exactly climb your way up through the stomach. Trust me, that's a one-way street."

"Gonna make it to the blood stream. They say you go from 0 to 11 g's just like that," Samson says with a snap of his finger. "Say the rush is unlike any high you've ever been on. And it'll take you straight to the top. I gotta guy at the infection site that's gonna get me past the wall."

Not too long ago, the body inserted long cylindrical rods into the stacks and began injecting foreign bacteria to shore up the depleted workforce. Already faced with the survival crisis, xenophobia quickly set in among the native-born and suspicious speculations soon turned into violent resource wars that spurred a migration crisis. With nowhere safe to go in the stacks, refugees began flocking to the injection sites, overrunning the white blood cells that maintained the intestinal walls. Foreign bodies began flooding these weak points, hoping to escape into the bloodstream and make it up north to a “better life”. The body began fighting the natural infection by incinerating the escapees with unbearable temperatures and dumping white blood cells at the symptom. Despite the nearly certain failure rate and incomprehensible mortality rates, everyone down here seems to dream about breaking through the barriers and ‘making it up top’.

“But Samson, that’s just a pipe dream.”

“I don’t care. It’s my dream.”

“But you wouldn’t have a purpose, and no one would accept you up there. At least down here you have a purpose. Down here you process what the rest of the community isn’t willing to. And that means something.”

“Man, I’m tired of being a chemo head and getting dumped on. I want to be one of those big kahunas up there.”

“But they don’t do anything! They just sit up there and fester in their own self-importance and ignorance. There’s nothing special about them. They were just born into that position.”

“So what? I wouldn’t care how I got there as long as I made it to easy street.”

“But they’re just standing by and letting the virus kill the body! How can you say you want to be one of those self-absorbed assholes?!”

“Man, you need to chill out. Take another hit of this and it’ll all be ok.”

That same sickening apathy meets me where ever I go. I understand that it’s really the only sane stance to take, but I can’t fucking stand it. How can you play music when the ship’s sinking? Sometimes it’s enough to make me forget my own fatalistic impotence and replace it with rageful resentment against this dystopian system.

I stormed out the chemo crevice and into the main thoroughfare with a head full of drugs that needed to be cleared.

That’s where I met Mito. I found him getting jumped by five nasty-looking streptococci as I crossed an abandoned lumen; angry and trapped, I instinctually rushed in to fight back against my world. I abandoned my instinctual need for self-preservation and began tossing the assailants. The other streppies got away when I grabbed one by their chained necks and began thrashing away without restraint. I almost attacked Mito when he reached in to pull me off my victim that had been pulped into a formless corpse.

After that, Mito took me in. He’s an ecoli that was born and raised in the stacks. By the time we met, fortune had smiled on Mito and he had elevated himself from common worker to an enforcer position at one of the immigration sites. In the depths of the stacks, it’s hard to keep track of the days, or even where you are, so I can’t really recall how long we spent together, but the days spent with him were a little easier to wake up to, and for that, I’m grateful. But, despite my new found family of one, I still felt the degrading emptiness inside and continued to rely on the chemos’ numbing medicine. I’ve since grown immune to most of the intoxicating effects, but sometimes,

I'm still able to capture that fleeting feeling of unencumbered contentment I never got to experience during my childhood.

"Dude, you need to stop hanging out with the chemo-heads and come work with me. I could easily get you a job." Mito's always pushing me to occupy my time with more meaningful pursuits.

"Mmmmm, I don't think so. I don't want to work for the virus." He still doesn't understand that all labor is ultimately meaningless as long as it continues to serve the virus's corrupted policies.

"It'd be better than sitting around here all the time like one of those bums I'm always catching at the walls." I know Mito's comment isn't meant to be derisive. I know that he's just trying to find a way to distract my mind because he's afraid of the singular conclusion my fatalistic logic always leads me to.

"They aren't bums, Mito. There's nothing down here for them and they're just searching for a better way to survive. The real bums are the viruses."

"Oh boy, not this again," Mito always looks down on those that continue to grind under the system with dreams of escaping to the fantasy world of the top-siders, and conveniently overlook their exploitation by the virus that keeps them in this state of indentured servitude to feed its own gluttonous consumption. The cognitive dissonance is probably a necessity for him. Otherwise, he'd probably see what I see – that his purpose is dependent on the migrants perpetuating the cycle predicated on the virus's perverted systems, "Dude, they don't do anything besides commit crime. Why can't you see that they're a bunch of animals?"

"Because they aren't animals. They're just like you and me. They're just trying to survive in their world that has no place for them because the virus is hoarding everything. It may be them today, but that could just as easily be you and me tomorrow."

"Dude, I know you can see it. You may be on this 'we are all one' kick, but I've seen what you really think of them. You would have killed that one streppie if I hadn't stopped you."

"Yeah. Maybe I overreacted. I don't think he deserved what I did to him." I never told Mito the shameful truth of that day because I feel like it's the foundation of our friendship. The truth is, I joined that fight hoping that the streptococci would finish the job that the stomach couldn't. They could have easily overpowered us 5 on 2, but I guess my mangled body and snarling face had warned them that I had already experienced far worse than they could inflict.

"I wish you wouldn't bring that up so often. I'm not very proud of that moment."

"Why not? You were incredible! And that streppie had it coming. If you hadn't stopped him, he'd be out raping and killing right now. I just wished the others had stuck around to get a dose of your street justice."

Mito's not completely wrong. My uncontrollable fury was probably pretty incredible to witness. Fueled by this inescapable trap and nowhere to vent, it tends to overwhelm in bouts of spectacular destruction that have been getting worse, lately. The knowledge that my world is dead and that ultimately my actions will have no effect on the outcome of this Hell has led me to the belief that death is now the ultimate mercy. And it infuriated me that those cowards couldn't man up and punch my ticket; and if they weren't going to relieve me of this existence, then I would relieve them.

"We don't know that. Maybe they just needed some food for their families. Who knows? Maybe they have the right idea with a life of crime instead of toiling away for the virus. If we all just quit like

them and just let the body die, then at least we could reduce our sentencing and not have to trudge through a life of suffering under the virus.”

“That’s never going to happen, so come and work with me and be productive with your time.”

“I’m not contributing to this bullshit system, Mito! Any work I put into the body will only be exploited by the virus. If I have to be here, then I’d rather spend my time on the dubious task of organizing cooperative systems that fight back against the virus.”

“Ok, so you’re just going to continue to do nothing.”

“Yeah, probably.”

Despite Mito’s barbs, I can tell that there’s no judgements. Despite his fallacious beliefs, I think he intrinsically understands that the system is fucked and we’re fighting for a futile existence. Understands that there’s rationalism behind my acceptance of defeat. That’s why he always lets me vent my frustrations without holding them against me to be used as petty retributions later. I wonder if he’ll ever understand what a precious gift he gave me with that. Probably the closest feeling to love that I’ll get to experience before I leave.

That’s why I don’t have the heart to tell him that I’ve made my decision. If I can’t even organize my best friend, my family, against the virus, then what hope do I have for this world changing? That’s why I’ve decided to take off during his next shift and head to one of the immigration sites to participate in the orgy of violence.

I’m not vain enough to believe that I’ll change the tide on the the war crimes happening at these sites, but at least I’ll die on the right side. Maybe my sacrifice will prevent some other cell from being lost in the melee and even help them make it topside. Maybe it’ll bring the body that much closer to death and end our collective suffering that much sooner. At least it will end my suffering.

In the end, I know it will be meaningless. After all, what’s one cell’s being against the sum of this absurd existence?