

# THE LAST C+ STUDENT

by Greg Stolze

*September 5*

I'm keeping a journal now. I didn't think it would get this bad. Civilization is, basically, gone.

It started back in February. At least, that's what the print newspapers in the library say. I heard about the Crow Virus some time in April, I guess. It's hard to recall. It was in China or India, so news here didn't cover it much. What we heard was that it was spreading really fast, and it was debilitating people but not killing them. So who cares, right? It's not AIDS, it's not here, why pay attention?

The footage from Calcutta in April or May was scary though. Crowds of people groaning and there was something just wrong with them. You could see it. Sometimes you meet someone and before they even open their mouth, you can tell they're not right. They won't meet your eyes or they stare too long or they don't stand the way people should. Like they're brain damaged or developmentally delayed or having a psychotic episode. They're outside the normal.

The Calcutta video was hundreds of people like that. Moving around, but without purpose. Moaning and groaning, that was the worst, the sound. Not words, just noises. Like a zombie movie with no biting.

Because it didn't kill people, because it took so long to come on, by the time people knew what it did, how far it went, it was everywhere. Hong Kong to Tokyo to Paris to New York to Rio to London. Maybe there's people in Antarctica who aren't exposed, I hope so, but every big city had a few people with the Crow Virus by the time the situation was clear.

- No one who catches the Crow Virus ever gets any better.
- Everyone exposed develops Algernon's Syndrome.
- Algernon's Syndrome takes off an average of one IQ point a day.

*September 7*

I guess I should of put more in the first entry, but Gennaro tripped and fell and I had to calm him down before he set off the others.

I'm 24 years old. I got married to Brenda eighteen months ago. I have a business degree and worked in an insurance office, processing claims.

I don't know why I never got the Crow Virus. Everyone else seems to. I mean, I live in a medium sized town in Ohio and everyone here got it, every single person but me.

According to the sign at the city limits, the population here was 37,221. Almost everyone died in June and July. I fed as many as I could, but we'd gotten to the end of the boxed food and fresh vegetables. All the grocery stores and mini-marts were picked over—it takes about a month or six weeks after Algernon's Syndrome starts for people to hit bottom. They can open a bag of chips, but anything in a can or anything frozen might as well be inside Fort Knox.

I got generators a few months back. I use them to power freezers. People had been hoarding them, but when they got too confused to keep them fueled, couldn't read the starter instructions and forgot what they were for, I just walked into the country club and wheeled them out.

Some big guy set himself up as boss at the country club. He didn't last any longer than the rest. For a while, his bullies were riding around with shotguns claiming stuff, but they weren't hard to avoid. I honestly don't think they were very smart before the virus, and afterwards they had a shelf life of about two weeks before they couldn't follow orders or remember what they were doing. Another week after that, they lost language or couldn't drive a car any more.

Some people died of thirst, probably. In July and late June, it got pretty hot. Maybe it was heat prostration, you can die from that, right? I should look that up.

A lot more died from infections. Basic first aid skills like "wash it off, put on a bandage, keep it clean and dry"—that stuff fades before language, and emotional maturity erodes around the same time or a little before. So people get hurt and can't take care of themselves, small wounds get infected, then they get fevers and die from them. Having random corpses piled up in houses or on the street can't help the sanitation situation either. The infected don't know about antibiotics any more.

Little things like that, I don't know how many people died from that. Petty injuries. I mean, dead bodies, I can't guess what killed them or how long they've been that way. I can tell when one's pretty fresh and when one's been picked over by dogs and cats, but I don't have any idea how many people starved or got sick or fell and hit their heads. Big Boss Man and his gang shot some, but not too many, I don't think. He was trying to build a new order but people were getting simpler and more forgetful all the time. Including him.

Like I said, I don't know why I didn't catch it.

*September 8*

There's a nice park behind the library. I can sit here and write this and watch my survivors, run out if any of them panic or fall over or accidentally hurt each other. It's awful.

The survivors are:

- Julian and Gina Brayton, from church.
- Tom and Debra Anselm. They lived in the apartment next to ours.
- Christa Woodrow. We just found her wandering the streets, already far gone. She had her wallet on her, that's how I know her name.
- The Cortez family, Joan and Ruiz and their daughters Amanda and Frances. Joan worked with Brenda.
- Therese Arnaud. Like Christa, we just found her one day. We walked by her house and she came out. She must be around seventy.
- Tabbi Browne, from my work.
- Scott Burch and his husband Mitch Donnelly. Mitch worked with Brenda.
- Darren and Willa Dresner, and their kids Steve, Tina and Liz.
- Gennaro Armenides, the handyman from our apartment complex.
- Brenda

I guess I don't list myself as a 'survivor' because I'm OK, mostly. I can turn on a stove and cook hot dogs or make noodles, I can scavenge gas out of old cars and semis, power the generators, keep the frozen goods cold. If we don't get rescued before winter, there's plenty of wood to smash up for fires to keep warm. We'll have to pick a well-insulated house with a fireplace, make that home base. Or, I guess, I will. It's doable. I just have to keep track of them all, by myself, and take care of them.

I miss my wife. I mean, she's here, but just her body. Maybe ten percent of her personality's in there, the simplest tenth. When she laughs, sometimes it sounds just like she used to, when we'd hear something good from a morning DJ. But sometimes she laughs like an animal.

*September 9*

If you're wondering about the order in which things failed, it went like this.

First, there was the media blackout from Asia, where all this got started. Borders closed due to quarantine, sure, but there were still stories coming out on WeChat and other social media for a while. All the stuff we heard—everyone gets it, everyone is stupefied, infrastructure starts to crash when a fifth of the population has impaired judgment and reaction times but still remembers how to operate a car—we believed it, and it all played out exactly like that here. Maybe we figured we'd do a better job than China and India. Maybe we thought it was exaggerated. Or maybe we tried our best and did everything right, but we just couldn't win.

Here in the 'States we stopped letting flights in from Asia, Africa and Australia, but it was way too late—New York, DC, LA and Miami were already struggling with Crow Virus infection. Soon they were having brownouts and water shortages when people who were supposed to maintain infrastructure regressed to preschool and beyond. Just like Beijing, Sydney and Lahore.

We tried in Ohio. We stopped accepting truck travel from the East Coast, then from anywhere outside the state, but it was unenforceable. The cops and State Troopers and National Guard didn't have enough people to keep every road shut and, again, everyone was getting infected. Attrition from the virus kept the roads open for a while, until no one could drive any more. By that point, it was way too late. Besides, we couldn't stop the crows, now could we?

Things got really serious when the internet shut down. That was not long after the governor tried to seal the border. One day we all got 404s and our phones couldn't call anyone. The whole telecommunication infrastructure had been getting spottier for weeks as server farms went unattended and power plants went offline, but on May 21, it all came down.

Thinking about it, everyone did the same things, just on smaller and smaller scales. First the whole world tried to exclude Asia. Then the US tried to block out everywhere else. Then Ohio tried to shut its borders, then our town did the same thing, and it ended with people barricading their neighborhoods and locking themselves in their houses.

None of it worked. The virus was airborne from person to person and also from birds. How do you keep birds away?

I hope those scientists in Antarctica are all right.

*September 11*

Man, since 2001 today has always been this heavy day. In the Bush era, everyone who wanted to beat up Muslims threw a guilt trip on anybody who suggested war might end badly. Then later, if you pointed out it was going badly, they said you had no respect for all the soldiers who died. But finally, all that sectarian violence and right/left conflict is over. From where I sit, there aren't any religions or states any more. Reconstructing the vote is going to be way down the list after getting clean water and rebuilding everything.

Someone has to be working on a cure. I can't do it, I'm one lone office worker in a post-insurance world. I was a C+ student who got by with help from brighter kids.

God, I may be the smartest man alive. That's the scariest thought I've ever had.

*September 12*

Hangover today and Gennaro fell and hurt himself. He's so clumsy but also big and strong. It was a pain in the ass to get him cleaned up and a bandage on it, and he won't stop picking at it. It's like a dog when you put on the cone of shame.

(later)

I just read what I wrote and I feel like shit. Gennaro's still a person, exasperating though he is. It's the illness that's made everything so awful. Also, that was the hangover talking. Before all this, I'd drink once or twice a day, but I think I'm going to give it up entirely. Certainly I'm spoiled for choice—there's all kinds of high-end liquor in all the stores, it won't go bad and the other survivors don't like it. Christa found an open bottle of vodka in someone's house, took a sip and then dropped it on the floor, crying. She probably thought it was water and then felt it burn.

Yesterday, on 9-11, I drank a bunch of peach schnapps because I always liked really sweet booze and now, there's no one to call me a pussy. So this morning I had a crushing headache when I was trying to clean up Gennaro. It wasn't all that bad—scraped knee and elbow, but he really wrestled with me while I was trying to get it clean. He was screaming and weeping and that upset everyone else. Some cried, some ran and hid, so then I had to round them up again and it got to be lunch time. Therese isn't eating well, hasn't for a few days.

*September 20*

I haven't written in this for a while because things have been hectic. I mean, managing almost twenty... twenty what? I need a word for them. I think of them as toddlers, sometimes, but that's not right at all. They have the bodies of adults. Tabbi, Brenda and Debra especially.

(later)

I almost scratched out that last sentence. I'm ashamed. It's all so gross. They're grown women, beautiful women, one of them my wife but they're like children. They can't even talk. I tell Brenda I love her and she just looks through me, vacant.

Brenda was going to grad school in microbiology. If anyone should have resisted, it was her. She could have done something about it. I don't know shit! I tried to read some of the bio books in the library but I couldn't make a dent in them. It was horrifying because they made me feel stupid, and feeling stupid makes me terrified that I've gotten the virus, that I'm falling into the syndrome. What's going to happen to Steve and Amanda and little Liz and all the other kids if they lose me?

We lost Therese.

Do I maybe mean I lost Therese?

Here's how it went, which is how it always goes. Anytime I want to do something—need to do something—we all go. Which is a huge production because Tabbi is the only one who likes riding in a car and even her, she won't wear a seat belt. Mostly we walk places, though I did get one of the school busses for when it's far. We were walking to another grocery store to see about canned goods when it started to rain. And they all just scattered. Nineteen assorted adults and kids yelling, running, swatting at rain drops, and I had to pick a safe place for us to wait it out. I chose a flower shop and steered Christa and the Anselms inside. Then I went after the Dresners, especially the kids. I've been trying to work with Steve and Liz, I'm hoping that maybe they can re-develop one day, since they got the virus before puberty. So I found the two girls and Tabbi and Scott, got them in the flower shop, and it turned out Tom had somehow locked himself in the office. I tried to get the door open and wound up having to kick the damn thing down, which scared poor Tom until he was screaming, which frightened the others, so Liz and Tabbi fled the store and I had to go get them again after calming down Tom. By this point it was thirty minutes into the rain. I had five out of nineteen inside, I was soaked, it was cold, and I was tired from all the running.

I did some yelling. Brenda, thank God, still responds to my voice. Joan's good about that too, and her daughters follow her. So getting the four of them didn't take long and in the process I found Liz and Tabbi again.

Then it was just more wandering through the rain, shouting, pausing, and listening. Then again. I periodically checked back at the flower shop to make sure nothing else was wrong. In the middle of this I heard cries, and when I went towards them, I found Ruiz and Mitch at the top of a stairway, with Therese at the bottom.

It was one of those concrete stairs with a metal pipe handrail, going down from the sidewalk to a school athletic field. Why Therese decided to hide from the rain by heading towards a football field I can't guess, but she must have wiped out and fallen all the way down.

The worst part was, she survived the fall. One arm and one leg were visibly broken—no tear in the skin but extra bends where there shouldn't have been. I tried to get Ruiz and Mitch to help move her, but they wouldn't. Couldn't understand my words and gestures, and probably too scared. When I tried to lift her, she just screamed and screamed.

I left her there.

I had to leave her there.

I had to get Ruiz and Mitch to safety and find the others before they got too far, before they got lost, got soaked and cold, got sick. I had to do it.

Maybe if I was smarter, I could have thought of something. Maybe if I'd been a doctor or an EMT instead of a paper-pusher for commercial real estate insurance, I could have helped her. But I'm not, I never was, and the thought that I'm getting dumber is why I'm lying in bed writing this by the light of a battery-powered lantern. It's why I can't sleep even through the exhaustion.

I shouldn't have to do this, I'm not equipped, no one can take care of nineteen helpless people on their own.

So I guess we'll find out if it's possible with eighteen.

*September 23*

Liz, Scott and Gina are sick. It's hard to get their temperatures, but they seem to be around 100 or 101. They cough a lot. Gina's not eating.

I've tried to isolate them from the others so it doesn't spread, but it's hard to keep an eye on everyone when it's two groups.

*September 29*

Mitch is gone. They were out in the park, and I fell asleep on a bench. Not for very long. It's probably going to be one of the last nice days before it gets too cold and rainy, I just wanted them to get some time outside before the fall. I fell asleep and when I woke up I had to chase everyone up and Mitch wasn't there. I looked and looked after I got everyone back inside the old Baffin House lobby—the Baffin House was this old mansion that got turned into a hotel, it's near the library and it has a bunch of fireplaces.

I couldn't find him. He didn't come home at night, so I think he's lost. Hopefully he hears us or comes home tomorrow.

Scott and Gina have gotten better, though Gina still has a runny nose all the time. I'm really worried about Liz.

*October 2*

We found Mitch's body. I don't know what killed him, animals had been at it. Scott made terrible sounds.

By this point, I think the syndrome's as bad as it gets, and people still remember who they loved. Dimly. The families stick together. Mitch and Scott did, somewhat. Brenda smiles when she looks at me, sometimes.

I've tried to kiss her but she just pulls away. All of them seem to be nonsexual—they huddle when it's cold but no one kisses. No one hugs for long. I don't even think the men masturbate. It's like they've forgotten how.

I, of course, remember perfectly.

*October 9*

Liz is dead. She was sick for so long, never got any better, but she never got worse, until she started convulsing and died. I couldn't do anything.

Darren, Gennaro, Ruiz and Amanda are all coughing and feverish too.

We haven't even had the first snow.

*October 11*

I finally did it. I finally got a ham radio to function. I'd been messing around with it since early September—just never put anything in here because it was all "Look stuff up in library books in the 620 section and try to find the equipment it talks about." I finally found an electronics store that was mostly intact. The corpse by the front door had a shotgun lying next to it. I think he shot himself in the head, probably in June or July because it was really decayed. I guess the headless corpse kept a lot of people out, until they got to the point where they couldn't grasp 'radio.'

Anyhow, I got receivers and amps and antennas put together and plugged in. I know it works because I've been hearing those automated numbers stations. So I'm just going to very slowly tune it across the dial and try to get someone to respond. Even if it's in a foreign language, hell, just knowing I'm not the last functional person would be a huge relief.



October 13

I've scanned from 30 to 300 kilohertz without results, but at least Ruiz and Amanda are getting better.

October 17

Covered 300 to 3,000 kHz. Thought I heard someone at 2,400 but maybe not.

Ruiz relapsed. Debra and Willa are sick too.

(later)

If there's anyone out there doing ham radio stuff, maybe they're skipping around too, just like me. What are the chances we'll intersect? Jesus. I guess I just have to keep pushing on.

October 20

OK, I've scanned every ITU band my equipment can pick up. Nothing but automated text. I was hoping for... I don't know what. Some military base. A submarine that stayed underwater the whole time. Scientists in Antarctica. Something to give me some hope.

Willa passed away. It was just like Liz. I broke into a pharmacy, into people's houses, into the drug supply at the country club but I don't even know what to give them or what they've got or how to diagnose it.

October 31

Happy Halloween. It snowed.

November 11

I've tried the radio over and over. Half the survivors are sick but they seem stable. I think I'm the last person with a fully working brain.

I really do think I might be the last one.

Why me? I was as exposed as anyone else. I've been living with breathing, sweating reservoirs of the virus for months and months, so I must be really, truly immune. I never even got the *mild* symptoms, the fever and the headaches and the drowsiness.

Is it genetic? I don't know. I'm not a biologist. I can't get the answers out of the biology books in the library, I'm a goddamn C+ student. Maybe the last one.

Maybe, if humanity is going to survive, I'm going to have to father an entirely new...

I don't even know the word. Nation? Species? Bloodline?

(later)

I tried with Brenda and she pushed me away. I was a little more persistent, a little more patient than I have been and she just got scared and upset. I can't stand to see her like that.

*November 12*

Tried with Tabbi and Debra. They're as unhappy as Brenda.

*November 14*

It is safe to say that no woman alive is willing to have sex with me.

There is no court anywhere that would judge any of these women capable of giving meaningful consent anyhow.

It would be like molesting a child.

The survival of the human race may now depend on me committing a series of rapes.

I won't.

We had a good run, I guess.

I think I'm done keeping this journal.