

Spore
by Ian Woodhead

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Thin, light drizzle had transformed the world outside his kitchen window into what his mother would have called 'a nasty vile mess'.

The heavens then opened and the drizzle became a downpour and yet those kids streaking across that field didn't even notice. Even those children who were dressed for the weather were now drenched.

Alistair Carstairs leaned over the full sink until his nose pressed against the cool glass. The combination of rainwater and studded boots had changed the colour of the field to dark grey. It reminded him of the washing up water beneath him.

Those kids had been out there for ages; Alistair knew that their distraught and angry parents would call not one of them home, not anymore. Their shackles had been removed, those lucky little boys and girls now had their freedom; they could do whatever they wanted.

He felt his wrist getting wet. Alistair pulled his face off the glass and looked down; he groaned. "Oh hell."

Alistair had trailed his sleeve in the cold water. He squeezed out the end of his woollen jumper the best he could. He was so glad that he had decided to don his green jumper today; the water would be more noticeable on his yellow one. Mother would give him punishment if she noticed. It didn't seem fair; it looked like he'd have to wait a little longer for his own shackles to be removed.

He sighed and put the matter behind him, relying on the fact that mother's eyesight, along with the rest of her, had deteriorated badly over the last few days.

"Alistair?" A tired voice cried. "Have you done my tea yet?"

His heartbeat quickened. "Crap!" he gasped. He had been so busy watching the kids playing football that he'd forgotten all about making his mother's morning drink. Her

sense of time had gone on Saturday, so hopefully; mother still thought that she had just asked him to make it.

The worse her condition became, the more liberties he felt he could take. Alistair's one regret was that the foul woman's heart would stop beating before he would be able to exact complete revenge.

While he was still thinking of dishes best served cold, Alistair got on with preparing her morning tea.

"And there's nothing colder than Mother's morning tea." He whispered. Alistair used the hooked end of the slotted spoon to dig through the grey dishwater. It took a moment to snag the cup's handle. He could have retrieved the cup immediately if he had been brave enough to put his hand in but there was no way that was going to happen. The sink was full of every piece of cutlery that his mother had touched and it hadn't been emptied for a week. Heaven knows what could be swimming through that muck. Considering what was growing on and under Mother's skin, he thought the prospect of strange marine life swimming through that stuff would be more than likely.

He used a clean tea towel to wipe the congealing grease and other less identifiable substances off the handle and the outside of the cup. The towel then went into the swing bin under the microwave. He peered inside the cup and tried not to shudder; there was no way that he was going to ruin another towel by sticking it in there.

He then had a brainwave. Alistair grabbed the bottle of bleach from the cupboard under the sink and filled the cup to halfway. He then topped it up with the cold brown liquid sloshing around in the bottom of the teapot.

Alistair didn't think that there would be that much risk. Yesterday's tea had been flavoured with an eggcup full of his urine and Mother hadn't noticed that.

He placed the cup on a tray and carried it out of the kitchen, thinking that it may be a good idea to wash this jumper once he had dealt with Mother. He then stopped and watched the wet fibres from his jumper fall to the floor like decaying leaves from an autumnal tree. He changed his mind; it would have to follow the towel into the bin.

Alistair padded past the living room. Half listening to the newsreader announcing that the outbreak had now spread to four more counties, and our friends in the United States were doing everything they could to help us in their hour of need. He wasn't sure, but he could swear that he heard just a touch of sarcasm in that man's voice just then.

The news programmes were the only thing they were showing on the television nowadays, Alistair sighed; they had even cancelled his afternoon soaps to make way for extended coverage. That was such a shame; he looked forward to catching up with the characters' exploits. They were Alistair's only real contact with the outside world.

He padded into the hallway and stopped before her door. There was little point in knocking, Mother's hearing was now worse than her eyesight. He took a deep breath, held it then entered the room.

Oh heavens. Alistair had trouble believing that the thing on the bed was the same woman. His Mother had almost doubled in size since last night and gained considerable weight, considering how her bed was now bowing in the middle. He looked away; the sight of all that exposed flesh, in various stages of change made him feel quite nauseous.

"Is that you Alistair?"

"Yes Mother." he said in a hushed tone. "I've brought your tea."

Even in this feeble state, she still had power over him. God, he hated that. Alistair was a strong boy; his arms and shoulders were heavily muscled and very powerful, due to over a decade of lifting her in and out of the bath.

One single punch in her rotten face would silence her forever but even the thought of his hand sinking into that swollen, mottled grey flesh filled him with revulsion, it would be like hitting a giant marshmallow.

What was even more sickening was that he knew he could get away with it as well. Anybody over the age of forty who hadn't already died had been rounded up and quarantined. He had dragged Mother through the living room and hid her in a cupboard when the officials had knocked on their door last week. He had explained to them that Mother was one of the first to be infected and was already dead. He'd told them that he had burnt her corpse in the back garden. They had seemed satisfied with the explanation.

There had been rumours that the council were using the facilities at a couple of local abattoirs to deal with the more heavily infected. He grinned at the thought of firing an explosive bolt through Mother's brain. That was supposed to be quick and painless; it wasn't good enough for her. No, his way was so much better.

She was already pretty gross after three weeks of this vile stuff eating into her, he couldn't wait to see what she would end up looking like when the devil finally arrived to take her twisted soul.

Her arm whipped out, Alistair had to move fast to avoid it touching his clothes. He retreated to the safety of the corner of her room. He watched with disgust as black mucus secreted from the underside of her arm ate through the varnish on the bedside cabinet.

That was a new feature; she hadn't been able to do that last night. Mother hadn't been stingy with her new feature either.

The foul smelling stuff was everywhere, on the bed covers, in the carpet, flicked onto the wallpaper behind her. There were even a few spots on the ceiling. How in heavens name had she got it up there?

Mushrooms had sprouted from where some of the stuff had dried. They were all one uniform shape, a thin stalk topped with a small flat cap; all were black and seemed to glisten as if coated with globules of sweat.

“You’re such a good boy.” She rasped. “It reassures me that you’re here to look after your poorly old mum.”

Alistair jerked from his reverie. That was new as well; Mother had never admitted that anything was wrong with her before.

“Why don’t you come over here, Alistair? Come on; give mummy a big hug and a kiss.”

Alarm bells went off in his head. Oh heavens! Alistair recognised and dreaded that sly and insinuating tone he had just heard in Mother’s voice, that tone had always been the prelude to one of her horrible games.

The blood in his veins turned to ice slush. He started to edge towards the open doorway. He had been mistaken about her mind unravelling. Oh heavens, was she still alert inside that diseased mass of knotty flesh? Was her mind still as sharp as ever?

“And where do you think you are going you deceitful little child?”

His feet stopped of their own volition. “I, I, I...” he stammered.

“Silence, child and stay where you are!” she bellowed. “What? Did you think I didn’t know what you’ve been trying to do to me?”

She brought the cup to her face. “So it’s bleach today then? My, you are getting imaginative. I should make you drink this concoction, but no I couldn’t do that; it would make me as wicked and evil as you.”

The cup fell from her hand, its contents seeping into the covers. She lifted up her huge arm as if stretching.

“Do you know what happens to nasty little boys who try to poison Mother?”

Alistair numbly shook his head.

“We listen to what the good book says and act accordingly. Now come here”

He shook his head, there was no way that he was going anywhere near her.

“So, it’s come to this has it? You’ve actually found your backbone and worked up the nerve to defy me. After everything, I have done for you. I’ve kept you safe from this wicked world for twenty five years and this is how you repay my kindness?”

A line of tiny black lumps pushed up through her mottled, rough skin and like opening eyes, the flesh parted.

Alistair should have run from the room there and then or at least ducked down but Mother had commanded him not to move and years of indoctrination were so hard to break. Her muscles tensed and a single hole in the middle opened a little wider. At the

last moment, Alistair closed his eyes and turned his head as a jet of the black slime sprayed across his cheek.

He opened his mouth to scream and some of it dripped into his mouth. Oh God! It tasted of his Mother's stale sweat mixed with damp vegetable decay.

Alistair burst out of the room with her maniacal laughter ringing in his ears.

A man in Oxfordshire was due to be executed after being found guilty of attempting to murder his neighbour by dropping crushed mushrooms into the man's water-tank.

There was a limited nuclear exchange between Israel and Iran last night after both countries accused each other of starting the outbreak.

A fire has consumed the town of Eastbourne after rumours circulating the internet suggested that there was a higher degree of the disease mutating in retirement towns.

Alistair had spent the last five hours flicking through one news channel after another, looking for that one story that showed the infection had begun to appear in the young.

He now had a vivid red welt across his cheek and he could still taste the pungent odour of his Mother in his mouth despite eating two tubes of toothpaste and gargling his way through a full bottle of antiseptic mouthwash.

As for his new scar, Alistair suspected that he'd exacerbated the problem with the frenzied cleaning ritual he went through yesterday afternoon. He was borderline hysterical after Mother's surprise. Oh heavens, he just remembered picking up the bottle of bleach and the wire pan scrubber.

Alistair switched over the channel as the newsreader announced in a news flash that the infected were now throwing themselves into water supplies and reservoirs.

Mother had been very quiet these past few hours. He remembered hearing her shuffling about and he heard a couple of groans but that was it. He hadn't checked in on her; there was no way he was going anywhere near that room again.

Five hours of intense television viewing had turned him into a virtual expert on the subject of the infection. Although cold hard facts and unsubstantiated claims often merged into a large grey area, there were a couple of pieces of information that had been established as a certainty.

Infected people were frail and weak and became weaker as the infection ate through their body. Their life span was measured in days. Three weeks was the record so far. A

few days before the end, the body began to dry out until, on the last day, the mummified corpse would just burst apart at the slightest vibration.

Vast clouds of the stuff had already been ejected into the atmosphere; some parts of Britain had not seen sunlight in over a week.

That wasn't happening to Mother, she was something different. The welt started to itch. Mother was something new.

He stood up and padded over to the kitchen window whilst absently scratching away at his cheek. Alistair failed to notice that the scum-covered water in the sink was now choked with tiny black mushrooms.

It was a little murky outside but Alistair could still make out the shapes of a couple of boys playing. He grinned to himself, then noticed that his hand had been enthusiastically digging into his face. He stopped; his hand came away covered in blood and what appeared to be bits of black mushroom. He then saw the state of the sink. Had he put his hand in there? He couldn't remember.

Alistair pushed away his troubling concerns as a new and exciting thought broke his mind's surface. Now that mother was otherwise occupied, he could do what he wanted, for the first time in his life he was a free man.

Both his legs had begun to itch. He shook his head; a little itch wasn't going to stop him. Alistair hurried into the hallway to fetch his coat and hat. He looked at the front door and grinned; he couldn't wait to say hello to those kids outside.

Alistair ran to the door, not noticing that his fingernails were back on his cheek, ripping through the dry, papery skin to reveal oily, black flesh.