

THE DEAD ZONE

“Plague”
(f.k.a. “Casual Contact”)

Story by Jeremy Bernstein
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Johnny Smith has stopped many disasters. Murders, kidnappings, accidents. And he has his eye on stopping the greatest disaster of all time-- Armageddon. But what happens when Johnny foresees a natural disaster? Can Johnny stop a tidal wave? Or a hurricane? Or an earthquake? Or can Johnny stop one of the most insidious natural disasters all... a virus. Because the flu is coming to Cleaves Mills, as it does every year. Only this time, it's a killer. When Johnny foresees a deadly illness striking down the children of Cleaves Mills, he has to find the source, contain the illness, and identify a cure. Because now J.J.'s sick... and his psychic prognosis isn't good.

We open with our family: Sarah, Walt, J.J.... and Johnny, having the most awkward dinner of their lives. Sarah thought it might be a nice idea to have Johnny over as a means of helping him and J.J. connect. She's making every effort, but Walt isn't sure how he feels about it and J.J. couldn't be less interested. He doesn't even want Johnny to touch him. And we take a moment to reflect on just how it must feel for Johnny when his own son treats him like a leper. Like he's diseased.

The next day, Johnny recounts the disastrous evening to Bruce as they walk across the bustling Faith Heritage Alliance quad. They dodge students playing Frisbee, walking to class, sunbathing. Bruce attempts to cheer Johnny up, but Johnny just doesn't know what he can do about it. As they enter the Health Center, Johnny touches the counter... and is propelled into a vision.

WHOOSH! Chaos. Sick students everywhere. In the beds, lying on chairs, on the floor. There's a pile of backpacks, lying wherever they've been discarded in the rush.

Johnny staggers back in horror, out to the quad. The one that was full of people just a moment ago, but is now completely deserted, save for a skateboard and an air mask blowing in the wind like a tumbleweed.

Johnny immediately goes to Purdy with what he's seen. Some sort of virulent outbreak is going to occur on the Faith Heritage campus. Students will die. They have to diagnose the problem and try to contain it. Purdy agrees. He twists arms and calls in favors at the CDC to get them to send someone in.

But Johnny can't wait for someone to arrive from Atlanta; a few students have already come down with sniffles and fevers. Johnny suggests the first thing they should try is containment. If they can keep the disease from spreading, they can avert the future Johnny saw. All the sick students are from the Freshman dorm. Perhaps there's something in the air or in the vents, like the bacteria that caused Legionnaire's Disease. Purdy has the dorm evacuated and the students quarantined. And that's the first sign of real trouble, because you can't do that without somebody noticing. Students start to worry. Concerned local parents demand to see their children. Walt shows up to find out what the hell they're doing, worried they might start a panic.

Johnny tries to let his visions be his guide, hoping he can find the source of the infection before it gets too late. He tries to track hints of a mold or fungus in the Freshman Dorm, but he doesn't find anything. That's when another student falls ill, a sophomore who doesn't live in the Freshman Dorm. Johnny tries to look for a missing link, touching two sick students at once to see if there's a connection. And there is, but it's a connection that only Johnny could ever find, because Johnny's vision is *a germ's-eye-view, leaping from one student from another to another to another. He is tracking*

the bug as it spreads along the student body, a great interconnected chain of shared drinks, kisses, and breathing the same air, making its way between the two students Johnny touched. And then, as he watches, it spreads out from each of them, infecting more and more and more people. The Freshman Dorm isn't the source of this disease. It's out and about on the campus, which means containment is no longer an option.

When the CDC investigator, MARK PRATT, arrives, the situation doesn't improve. He's been pulled off a Bangor elementary school outbreak for this, and he doesn't have time for religious fanatics or fraudulent psychics. He's a scientist, and thinks Johnny's full of crap. Based on all the evidence, these students just have the flu, the same damn flu that strikes every damn year. There's nothing unusual or dangerous about it. Johnny tries to convince him otherwise, but Pratt won't be swayed by having his pockets emptied or his locket touched, and he certainly won't be swayed by any emotional appeal. The one thing that finally begins to sway him is data, when Johnny convinces him to check CDC records for unusual reports of flu symptoms. Sure enough, there's an above average level of sore throats and runny noses being reported all across New England. Now Johnny has Pratt's attention, if not his belief. When a little girl dies in Bangor from flu-like symptoms, Pratt starts to worry that this year's flu may be more virulent than usual.

And now we pull back from Faith Heritage Alliance, back from dorms and Purdy's halls. Because while this has been happening, students have been getting transferred from school infirmaries to hospitals. Reporters have been asking questions and printing stories. And people have been hearing rumors, which have spread like... well, like a virus. Cleaves Mills is under siege from an invisible airborne invader. Panic

sets in. People stay indoors. They wear masks in the street. Children don't go to school. Hospitals are flooded with frantic calls from paranoid healthy people. The Emergency Room is crammed with false alarms and real ones.

Walt is working hard to keep things safe at the E.R., while Johnny, Pratt, and Bruce work to find a cause or a cure. Flu viruses are common enough, and they live by a simple maxim: "Adapt or die." They constantly mutate, giving rise to new forms each year, sometimes less virulent, sometimes more. This year, it looks like it's going to be worse than expected. The key is to figure out how the virus has mutated, which will be crucial to figuring out how to treat it.

A key connection is made when they realize that only people under 18 are getting infected, hence only freshmen were sick (and one underage sophomore). This points them towards the flu epidemic 18 years ago. Anyone vaccinated against that flu seems immune to this one. There must be similarities between the two viruses. Johnny's visions provide him with vital details of the past epidemic, which, in a complicated yet fascinating way, are necessary for a cure. However, they are not sufficient for a cure. They need more. Ideally, they need Johnny to see the virus. If he can do that, he can describe crucial features to Pratt that will lead to treatment or a cure.

Johnny doesn't know how much his Dead Zone will be able to help him. "It doesn't come equipped with an electron microscope," he tells Bruce. "How do you know?" Bruce asks. "You've seen into a human heart before, and you used to teach science. You've got the tools. You just need to figure out how to use them." Bruce uses his Zen to try to help Johnny focus his powers on the task at hand.

Meanwhile, we cut to Sarah and J.J. quietly at home. School's out for the day, heck, probably for the week. They're calmly playing. Sarah maybe even tries to talk to J.J. about Johnny, trying to find out why he makes J.J. so uncomfortable. Maybe not. Anyway, it's a perfectly normal mother/son play day. Until J.J. coughs. Sarah's blood runs cold. She picks up the phone and calls Johnny. "Can you come over," she asks. "It may be nothing, I mean, he only gave a little cough, but--"

ZOOM! Johnny literally drops what he's doing. He rushes out of the hospital, running past Walt but not saying anything. He gets to the Bannerman house, opens the door... and gets a vision off the doorknob. *Masked paramedics, wheeling a gurney right through Johnny... and a pale sickly J.J. is on it.* Without a word, Johnny rushes in and grabs J.J.

Sarah and Johnny rush J.J. to the E.R., where Walt has been unaware of his kid's condition. It crashes home for him quickly. As the doctors take J.J., fear and concern for their son turn to anger between Walt and Johnny. "You ran right past me on the way out of here! Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"'Cause he's my son, too!"

And now it's been said. Walt, Sarah, and Johnny spiral into their own conflicted emotions over their difficult situation. The pressure is cranked up to eleven. Johnny and Bruce work even harder at getting his Dead Zone to show them the virus; Bruce has him looking through microscopes to kick-start the vision in the right direction. Johnny does get visions, hints of why the virus mutated, images of sunspots, but he still can't see the virus itself. Sarah's emotional turmoil and the complexity of their relationship doesn't help, nor do Purdy's biblical musings. Nothing seems to cut it.

Johnny's frustration leads him to J.J.'s bedside, watching his ailing son. All his powers, all those things he can do, the Armageddon he's supposed to save the world from, and he can't even save the life of the son who doesn't know him. The son who now maybe never will. He takes J.J.'s hand, maybe the first time that he ever has... *and whooshes into J.J.'s bloodstream for a quick vision of the virus.* It only lasts an instant, but it's enough for Johnny. Bruce's Zen advice clicks into place, and Johnny knows what he has to do. All the electron microscopes in the world won't help him. He has to hold his son's hand to see it, because, as Bruce will point out, Johnny's visions don't work through science. Johnny's power works through people, and none of them are more important to him than this one. He focuses again, trying to force the vision on demand...

... and Johnny zooms through J.J.'s skin, into his bloodstream, a CSI: Dead Zone shot as Johnny quite literally courses through his own son's veins. And among the blood cells all around him, he sees the virus itself. Johnny calls for Pratt and gives him the insight he needs. Pratt recommends the appropriate anti-viral agent, which proves successful. They now have a treatment, and know enough to develop a proper vaccine for this strand of the flu.

Walt and Sarah are overjoyed, now that J.J. is going to be all right. As the panic recedes, Cleaves Mills starts to return to normal. People come out of their holes. And Johnny Smith, now more than ever, is left with a sense of how important to him the tiny, precious hand of his son is...