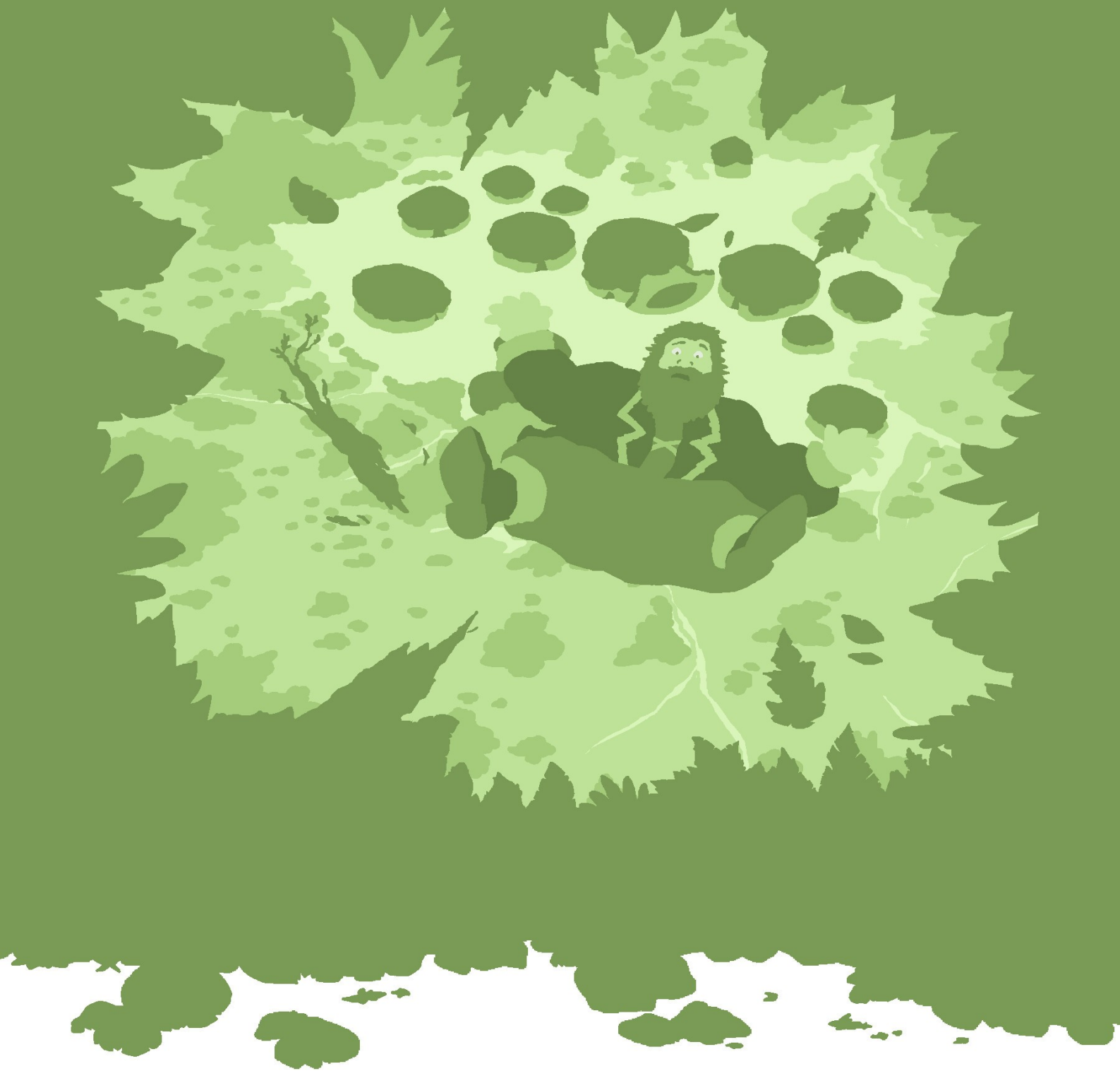


# ONION GODS



SIMON GOODWAY

# Not Tested on Animals

## A story from Onion Gods

Of all the emotions slithering within the eel tank of Jodie Holland's mind as she took her daily walk to the lab, exhaustion was probably chief. Or resentment, or desperation, or hope. Take your pick.

Exhaustion because she'd worked so hard, and for so long. Soon it would be over, though that provided little consolation when she was so close. Three more weeks until the company closed the lab, officially for budgetary reasons, but Jodie didn't doubt the real reason behind the closure. She should never have let on how close she was to finding a cure – a real, actual cure for Burkitt's lymphoma. Stupidly, naively, she thought they'd be pleased. Maybe even increase her budget. But the company made a fortune from chemotherapy drugs – why the hell would they want a cure?

And so they'd shut her down – hence the resentment. She'd already lost her assistants; Jodie was only still around because her contract was almost up, and it was cheaper to ride it out than pay her redundancy. But there was very little she could do, alone in the lab. Well, almost alone: she still had Tanya.

Very little, but not quite nothing. The time she had left could just be enough, and that was the source of the desperation. Technically, pedantically, she'd already found the cure – the drug she'd developed would entirely eradicate the cancer, she was certain of that. It was just that, in its present state, it would kill you first.

She understood why it cured the cancer. She didn't understand why it killed you, and there wasn't time enough to find out, but perhaps she didn't need to. There were sixteen variants of the molecule that would, in principle, cure the disease. She only needed one that lacked the lethal side effect.

Hence the hope.

She approached the gates to the lab. Predictably, Stan Winton was lurking outside. She really thought he'd give up when they announced the closure. He was persistent, she'd give him that.

"Murderer!" he shouted as she came close. "Scum!"

"Hello, Stan," she replied calmly. His abuse washed over her. It was an irrelevance now, like a headache in a war zone – annoying if you stop to think about it, but hardly a priority.

She unlocked the gate and walked in. For a moment it looked like Stan was going to limit his assault to a verbal one today, but then – yes, there it was – an egg cracked on the back of her head. She swore under her breath and kept walking.

Once inside, she cleaned the yolk out of her hair in the kitchen and went through to the lab.

"Hi Tanya," she said. Tanya looked up at her and sighed – not the most enthusiastic greeting, but Jodie could hardly blame her. "Stan egged me again. Idiotic fool – I get attacked for cruelty to animals, but I've seen his egg box, and they're not free range."

Tanya gurned at her. It was three days since her last injection, with no apparent side effects. Jodie was working her way through the sixteen variants of the cure. She gave Tanya a mild dose – not enough to kill her, or to cure the cancer if she had it, but enough to induce the prolonged, searing pain that preceded death in a stronger dosage. She'd tried nine variants so far, and every time the patient had suffered badly.

Cruelty to animals? It's a fair cop. She hated to do it, to watch the chimp in so much pain. She loved animals, always had; but she loved people too, and Tanya's suffering could save so many lives. Not least... well, best not to think about that. Keep your personal feelings out of it, Jodie. Stay professional.

She cleaned out the chimp's cage and gave her a generous pile of fruit. Jodie watched her eat. When

she looked into the chimp's eyes, she felt as though they understood one another; but at the same time, as though they never could, like there was a river between them they could never cross.

She gently injected the chimp's behind with variant ten. Maybe this would be the one that gave her a cure – more likely, by the following afternoon the chimp would be on the floor of her cage, screeching in agony.

“I'm sorry, beautiful girl,” Jodie whispered, a tear running down her cheek. “Soon this will be over, I promise.”

\*

“I'm home!” called Jodie, letting herself into the flat. It had been a dull day at the lab – after injecting Tanya, there was very little to do but monitor her. The symptoms were slightly different with each variant, but generally there was no effect until the second day, so she hadn't expected anything to happen, and her expectations had been met. All she ever wanted was to come home to Liam, but she was forced to stay at the lab until five. Occasionally head office called on some pretext – really they were just checking up on her. They knew she had very little to do, and if they caught her knocking off early, they could fire her and shut the lab down with immediate effect. She wasn't going to let that happen.

Liam didn't respond to her call, but that wasn't surprising. He was so weak now. She went up to the bedroom and there he was, fast asleep. That was a blessing. He was in so much pain these days.

The twat next door was playing Vampire Weekend at full blast again. She'd have to have another word. He was always apologetic, but never gave a strong impression that he meant it, and it always happened again. Her husband was dying. Why didn't people care?

She sat beside the bed and stroked his head. How long had he got left? When people found out, they assumed she was working on the cure because her husband had the disease, but it was just one of those strange coincidences – her research was well under way when the doctor told them the lump in his abdomen was Burkitt's lymphoma. The doc had been surprised to discover what an expert Jodie was on the subject.

But all her expertise meant nothing if she couldn't find a cure that wasn't worse than the disease. If she did, she'd come straight home with a syringe of the stuff and inject it straight into Liam's arse. Sod peer review, sod clinical trials – she didn't have time to do things properly. It might save his life or it might kill him, but he would most certainly die if she didn't try.

He started to scream. It was that bad now – he was screaming in his sleep. Jodie whispered comforting words through her tears, and perhaps they did calm him a little, but he still looked so distressed.

“Maybe this time,” she said. “Maybe this one is the cure.”

\*

Jodie's heart stopped as she approached the lab. The gate was open.

When she got closer, she could see the lock had been smashed clear off. Someone had worked hard. She could guess who.

She looked around to see if there was any sign of the bastard, and that was when the true horror of the situation hit her. A little way down the street, swinging from a lamppost on the other side of the road, was Tanya.

Jodie tried to cross but there was too much traffic. Tanya saw her and scurried down the lamppost.

She had no such reservations about traffic, and lolloped into the path of an oncoming lorry.

Four tyres went right over her. The chimp was dead, no question: Jodie was about to rush over and recover the body, when she glimpsed something even more shocking in the corner of her eye. There was a fire in the lab. Her precious drugs!

She raced towards the building. It was too late to help Tanya, but she could still save her chemicals. She had no way now to test them, but she couldn't let them burn. They could yet save Liam's life.

The door had been kicked in. There was some relief to be had once she got inside; the fire wasn't as bad as it appeared through the window. She could see that he'd spread petrol, but ineptly, and the flames were yet to advance from the desk where they'd begun. She could stop this.

She grabbed the extinguisher and sprayed foam over the desk until the fire had been smothered. That danger was averted, but who knew what else the silly bastard had done?

She stepped out into the hallway and there was Stan coming down the stairs. He almost ran into her: they both got a shock, neither expecting to confront the other so suddenly. Jodie recovered first, and she was still holding the fire extinguisher. She'd never forget the sound it made when it crashed against his skull.

\*

Jodie filled the syringe with her final variant of the drug.

Sixteen variants: fifteen had caused dreadful, excruciating pain. A stronger dose would certainly have killed. What were the odds that this final version would be any different?

Actually, Jodie thought the odds were pretty good. Partly that was just optimism, but she believed that she was beginning to understand the cause of the unfortunate effect the drugs kept having on the nervous system. It was a vague hypothesis, based only on the slight variations in symptoms between the fifteen versions of the drug, but if she was right, this was the one that should buck the trend. This was the drug that would save her husband, without killing him first.

She just had to prove it.

She knelt beside the cage and lined up the syringe with the naked buttock pressing against the bars. He knew what was coming, but could hardly resist – there was barely room to move in that cage, built for a much smaller primate.

“Fuck you,” he growled, though the words barely came out. Three weeks he'd been in there now, in terrible pain for a great deal of that time, too restricted to even writhe in his agony. The creature that remained was barely alive, barely human. More animal, really, though Jodie doubted he'd appreciate the irony.

“If it's any consolation,” said Jodie, as she injected the drug, “this could save a lot of lives. I thought you'd approve. After all – it's not tested on animals.”

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