

THE MUD
by Macha Lopez

In the sweltering chaos of a field hospital, a medic's fight to save lives takes a sinister turn when a natural disaster uncovers a chilling curse lurking deep within the earth.

Short story written for the 2023 NYC Midnight Flash Fiction Challenge #1 (less than 1000 words)

Prompts: Horror / a military base / blueprint

We were dispatched a week ago - a disaster relief operation following devastating mudslides. That day, stepping out of the aircraft, lugging bags packed with supplies, I inhaled my very last breath of fresh, temperature-controlled air and dived headfirst into the intolerable clammy inferno.

Day after day, rescuers retrieved survivors from the mudslide, and we tended to their wounds. Gruesome wounds. Flesh, torn into strips by the rubble of people's lives and homes that had collapsed from under them when the mountain had given way. On the tent's floor, blood and mud mixed into a slurry of gore. These gashes would not heal well, nor fast - just like the gaps on the hillside would not close up anytime soon.

"Didn't get the dress code memo yet, doc?" a young sergeant mocked my neat and tidy looks. It was still early in the day, but he was already covered in red mud, head to toe. They all were, soldiers and civilians alike. Only his bright, teasing smile flashed out from the sludge. His teeth were white, flawlessly aligned. He'd probably worn braces as a teen, which, I could tell, was not too long ago. I faked a smile - too tired from the heat to think of a good comeback.

When people started collapsing, days into our deployment, we first thought of heat strokes. Out here, bodily functions were disrupted. That rainforest air was so saturated with water that sweat could not evaporate. So it lingered, encasing your skin like cellophane, soaking through all your clothes, suffocating your every pore. Even on solid ground, you were drowning.

"We'll set up cooling tents. Everyone's dropping like flies," I told my team.

We did what we could to help the afflicted: cooling chambers, fluid resuscitation, bed rest. Yet, we soon had a first death. A local girl, whose fever I could not bring down, no matter what I'd tried. I'd stitched up her thigh and administered IV antibiotics two days prior. I'd been confident that she would walk again soon. Only for her to die of heat? I wailed.

But when other deaths followed, some among our team, a primal panic spread through our camp like wildfire.

A disaster within a disaster.

Soldiers shared rumors - epidemic, terror attack, poisoned rations.

But locals... locals mentioned something darker: a forgotten curse, long buried in the mountain rock.

"The mud," they claimed, "it's spreading through the mud."

As a precaution, we burned the dead bodies, soldiers and civilians piled together. Choking on the heavy pyre smoke, I prayed. I was not sure whose work we came to do here, but it sure as hell didn't feel like God's.

But as I lay in my cot tonight, struggling to sleep, I do not think of the dead. It is the living keeping me up. These men, women, and children, afflicted with that strange, sudden jungle fever just days or hours earlier, have since recovered. The young smiling sergeant is among them. His symptoms, vanished, while others succumbed. I had them kept in

observation - quarantined, really. They complain of headaches, nausea, and chills. Nothing too unusual, except for the glassy whale eyes that they lay on you.

Something in their attitude bothers me, too. I find them... irritable? Restless.

Feral.

I close my eyes, fighting off a rising panic.

Both my hands rest on my belly, trying to rub the terror away.

I might have dozed off.

A scream pierces the night air, splitting it in half like a knife would some black mush.

I sit up in bed, head buzzing. I'm covered in sweat and struggle to untangle myself from the damp sheets.

Another scream.

No. Not a scream...

A howl.

My blood freezes in my veins.

I knock my cot over pulling myself out of bed and rush out into the dark toward the quarantine tent. Outside, I brush past running people. Running where? From what?

I swing the flaps open.

The tent is empty.

My patients are gone, and in their stead lingers a pungent smell, that of a pack of wet dogs.

I cross the entire camp, dashing towards the command center. I'm in my underwear, but no level of pride or protocol could now tame the gnawing horror that has me running like mad.

The command post is empty too and has been turned upside down.

On the wide central table, a mess of scattered documents: blueprints of a nearby mine, frenzied notes on toxic waste reports, maps of the surrounding mountains, and satellite pictures of our camp. All stained with sludge.

For the first time in days, I feel chilled to the bone.

Another howl, very close this time, brings me back to myself.

I exit the command tent and step into chaos. All around the camp, I hear growling, pleading, shrieking. Tents canvas and human flesh are being ripped to pieces. Gunshots. They only make the howls grow louder.

I smell blood. I could almost taste it.

I make a run for the woods.

I'm not sure at what point I realize I am being followed. The heavy footsteps behind me aren't even subtle. The chase lasts for quite a while. When my legs can carry me no more, I stop in my tracks, and the thumping stops too.

I am no longer breathing. Slowly, I spin.

From behind a bush, the Beast steps out to face me.
Half-man half-wolf, fur the same color as that red, toxic sludge that shrouds the entire valley.

It smiles.
I know that smile, I met it earlier this week.
But the young sergeant's mouth now opens on a debacle of razor-sharp fangs.
I blink, and the Beast is on me, ripping my chest open.
That is how I fall.

Above me, past the canopy, a million tiny lights flicker in the sky.
Red, like mud. Red, like blood.
Of course, I think, as my insides are being torn apart, the stars are in on it, too.