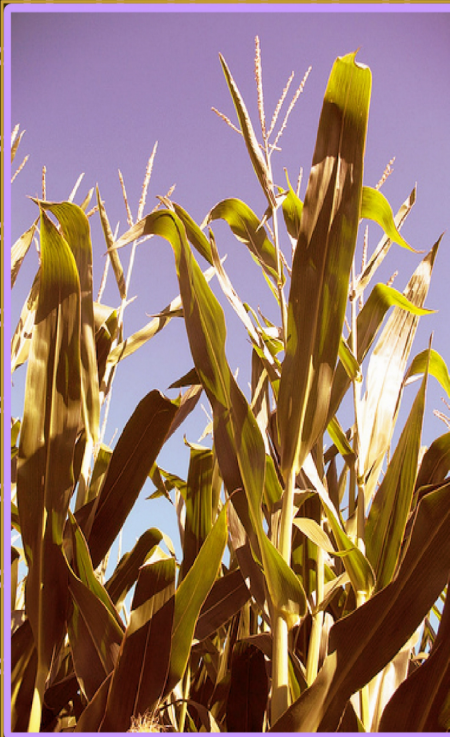


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Kulinary Killers



Crystal Brewton

Kulinary Killers

KULINARY KILLERS

CRYSTAL
BREWTON

Kulinary Killers

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TO JULIEANNE – I
HOPE I'M DEAD
WRONG.

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Millions of people suffer from food allergies and intolerances. This story covers three specific groups that exist. Caroline, who has *no* allergies or intolerances of any kind. Myra, who suffers from *severe* allergies and intolerances. Louise suffers from *some* allergies and intolerances, but many of her reactions prove themselves to be psychosomatic. After much research, I have found that all three of these groups exist. This isn't likely to please those who have legitimate allergies and intolerances, but I wanted to show that while legitimate allergies and intolerances exist, so do psychosomatic ones.



Prologue

She popped the peanut butter cup into her mouth the moment before the doorbell rang. Pushing her tongue to the roof of her mouth, she turned and looked at her bedroom door. Her parents voices could be heard downstairs, talking with her date for the evening.

The taste of peanuts always made her relax and this moment was no different. She ran her peanut butter coated tongue around the inside of her mouth. When she heard her mother calling, she paused and made herself count slowly to thirty. She didn't want to appear overly eager, even though she was.

When the thirty seconds were up, she stood and walked out of her bedroom door and down the stairs as if she had all the time in the world.

He looked magnificent to her and she couldn't resist the smile that spread on her lips. Neither could he, as he stood at the foot of the stairs, waiting for her. She stopped with two steps to go and looked into his eyes.

When he offered her his elbow, she took it with a regal air. It was all for show. Her parents were watching, after all.

They remained the perfect couple for the benefit of her parents until they got in his car. Then they relaxed and kissed deeply.

His seizure was violent and scared her so much that she could do nothing but scream for several minutes. By the time her parents came out to investigate the delay in his driving their

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daughter off, he was in a coma.

By the time paramedics arrived, he was dead.

The few groups who connected his death to the peanut butter cup were dismissed as paranoid quacks.

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Caroline Richardson sat down to a hearty breakfast, as was her ritual every Saturday morning. She did not feel the least bit guilty. She had no weight problem. It was just that on one day out of the week she forced herself to prepare a home cooked breakfast, sit down, and enjoy it.

Three eggs, four pork sausage patties, four pancakes complete with syrup. She also ate two pieces of toast covered thickly in butter and jam. To drink, she had a tall glass of orange juice and three cups of coffee, heavily laced with sugar and liquid coffee creamer.

She leaned back in her chair with the sigh of the *almost* completely satisfied. As she reclined, she pulled the pack of cigarettes off of the table. Removing one from the pack, she put the filter in her mouth, lit the tip, and inhaled. Her exhale was that of a woman *completely* satisfied.

Weekends were Caroline's 'free time'. During the work week, she rushed through her breakfasts of boxed cereal, lunches of sun lamp warmed cafeteria food, and suppers of whatever she could cook quickly. Monday through Friday she had to go outside of the building she worked in to have a cigarette, and in the years since she'd worked there, her kind had been forced further and further away from the building.

But Saturdays and Sundays were *hers*. She could sleep in and eat a meal that was fresh, hot and good. And she could smoke as much as she wanted without offending anyone.

She enjoyed her freedom as much as she enjoyed her cigarette. When she finished the smoke, she put the dishes in her

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sink to be washed during her Sunday night ritual. One of her least favorite rituals, but chores were necessary before she had to return to the daily grind of her job.

She took her cigarettes into her living room, where she sat and considered watching mindless television instead of going shopping for the week's groceries. That ritual just seemed too much like work to her today.

Lighting another cigarette and inhaling, she eyed the remote control on her coffee table, trying to decide if she really needed to do anything more than stay at home and relax.

The telephone rang and she sighed as she answered.

"Thank goodness you're home!" The voice sounded almost weak with relief. "I have to ask you a favor, Caroline."

Myra Locke was Caroline's best friend. They had met each other five years ago when Caroline had been working for one of Chicago's smaller neighborhood papers.

Caroline had been the author of an article praising the advances that were being made throughout the world and Myra had written her with the other side of the story.

At first, Caroline had ignored the letters. Myra, however, was not a woman who gave up easily. Three months after the article had run, and after four more articles just like it, Caroline had been visited by the woman who had written her once a week since the original article had appeared in the papers.

Initially, Caroline had listened with the polite attention of a reporter who had an irate reader ranting in her office. She smiled as Myra gave her statistics to try and back her story of problems with allergies and genetically altered foods in general, and corn in particular.

Perhaps it was just having a willing ear to listen to her, or perhaps it was something else, but when the working day was done, Myra invited Caroline to dinner. While Caroline suggested a popular restaurant directly across the street from the newspaper, Myra insisted on a restaurant on the far west side of the city in what Caroline knew to be one of the worst neighborhoods in the city of Chicago.

"It's the only place I can eat out and still hope to wake up the

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morning after,” Myra explained when Caroline asked why she chose such an out of the way place.

That meal was the beginning of a beautiful friendship and years of education for Caroline.

All of this flashed through Caroline's mind when she realized that Myra had called her.

“Of course I'm home,” she said to her friend. “It's Saturday.” She shrugged and took another drag off of her cigarette. “What favor do you need?”

“I need your car.” Myra's voice was almost pleading. “Mine died again and I'm hoping to get to a new grocery in Homewood that caters to those of us with corn allergies.”

Caroline raised her eyebrows at the mention of Homewood. It was a suburb on the south side of the city. She lived on the north side and Myra lived on the west side.

“You want to borrow my car?” She put as hopeful a tone in her voice as she could.

The slight pause told her she would not get what she hoped for.

“Actually, I have some more statistics and articles for you,” Myra announced. I was hoping I could share them with you while we were on our way to Homewood.”

Caroline nearly avoided a groan. She loved her friend, but she never could get as caught up in the cause as she knew Myra wanted her to. Being a newspaper reporter, she was in a position to get the word out on allergies and intolerances, especially now that she was working for the largest paper in the city.

Myra must have been desperate to show her the articles if she was willing to take a drive in Caroline's car. Cigarette smoke and allergies didn't go together.

Caroline took another deep drag off her cigarette and sighed deeply as she blew out the fragrant smoke. “Give me a couple of hours,” she barely restrained the resignation in her voice. “I'll be there at eleven.”

“Thanks, Caroline.” Myra's smile was clear in her tone. “I'm looking forward to it.”

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Caroline shuddered as she pulled up to the house. She had driven the last ten miles through the chilly spring weather with all the windows in her car down as far as they could go. This was done with the best of intentions – she wanted to make sure that as much of her cigarette smoke was gone from the interior of the car as possible.

As far as she could tell, the interior of the car was Springtime Fresh – exactly as it should be for Mid-May. Caroline thought she just might catch a cold, but sometimes a person had to make sacrifices for friends.

She got out of the car and headed up the walk of the house. Before she got to the door it opened and her friend Myra came out with her daughter Louise.

“You’re right on time.” Myra observed.

Caroline smiled. “I always am.” She put a sarcastic tone in her voice that she knew would never fool her longtime friend. She watched as Louise marched towards the car and waited patiently for the grown ups to finish their greeting rituals. The pre-teen did not look happy.

Myra watched her daughter. “She’s mad because we found out that she’s reacting to gluten,” she said in an undertone.

Caroline sighed. “Well, at least now you’ll be gluten-free together?” She tried to sound optimistic.

Myra sighed deeply. “It was bad enough when we gave up corn products,” she groaned.

Not knowing what to say, Caroline could only turn and walk with her friend to the waiting car. She opened the door for Louise

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and the teen all but threw herself inside. Myra walked to the passengers side and got in at the same time Caroline did.

When the door closed, Caroline could see the frown on Myra's face. Her nose was wrinkled, as if she smelled something unpleasant.

Caroline narrowly avoided a glare. "I drove the last ten miles with the windows open," she defended herself ahead of the accusations.

Myra bit her lip for a long moment and smoothed the wrinkles out of her face. "I'm sure you *did*." She sounded both resigned and disapproving. "Maybe we can *keep* driving with the windows open?" The suggestion was just barely that.

Caroline tightened her jaw but said nothing. She knew that her friend and her daughter were allergic to cigarette smoke, but as far as Caroline could tell, they were allergic to just about everything else, too. Their corn allergies alone staggered Caroline's mind, as it meant no soda pop or anything else that contained corn syrup. And that seemed to include anything that was sweet or almost sweet. Plus anything else made of or with corn ...

Caroline wondered again how she and Myra had ever become friends. They were literally like night and day. Caroline was ebony to Myra's ivory, with her dark skin and hair. Myra was a fiery redhead – literally and figuratively.

The fire died just slightly as Caroline pulled away from the house and began driving. She sighed deeply.

"I'm sorry, Caroline." She looked almost physically defeated. "I am just so tired..." Myra balled her hands into fists, "of being *broken*."

Caroline said nothing about that. There was nothing for her to say. She knew the long list of things her friend had to stay away from if she wanted to live.

"So tell me about these statistics and articles," she suggested. "Have they found a cure yet?" She tried to keep her voice light.

It didn't work. Myra stiffened. "Fuckers!" she spat. "They're just burning the midnight oil to kill us in more creative ways." She went into her huge bag and pulled out a sheaf of papers.

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Without looking at them, she spoke. "You already know I'm allergic to wheat, corn, soy, legumes, oranges, mangoes, kiwi, bananas, milk and latex, right?"

Caroline nodded, watching the road. The truth was she was always forgetting the list, but she didn't want her friend to know that.

Myra went on. "I'm intolerant to beef and sulfites. Amines set off asthma, arthritis and I.B.S. I have anaphylactic reactions to green beans, corn, and watermelons." She sighed deeply. "Hell, any melons." She looked into the back seat of the car, where Louise was staring out of the window at the traffic. "Louise is allergic to milk, peanuts, oranges, avocados, banana, chestnuts, papaya, eggs, preservatives, and now corn."

Caroline glanced in her rear view mirror just in time to see the young girl catch a tear with her finger and brush it away.

Myra continued to look at the papers in her hands. "Shampoos, toothpastes, soaps, conditioners, and lotions are all made with some degree of corn and gluten. We use baking soda to brush our teeth and peroxide as mouthwash." she sighed.

Caroline swallowed. Hearing the list always awed her. There was so much that Myra and Louise couldn't eat, drink or even be around...

"Corn is the worst," Myra continued. "They make plastics and papers with corn now." She didn't see Caroline flinch, slightly. "Ethanol, too." She finally looked at Caroline. "Where the fuck am I supposed to live to get *away* from all that shit? Ethanol fumes are going to be everywhere. Should I move to the country? Away from all roads? Where? Alaska?"

Caroline heard more than saw the papers drop into Myra's lap. "Eggs in vaccines..." she murmured, as if to herself.

With a sigh, Caroline switched lanes. "I have a confession to make..." she murmured.

Myra looked at her, almost suspiciously. "What's wrong?" she demanded, as if knowing for a fact that Caroline couldn't *possibly* have any good news for her.

She was right. "My editor says it's a no go on that allergy article I've been working on," Caroline confessed, her voice soft

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and apologetic. She motioned to the papers in Myra's lap. "I'll look over that stuff, but the article is a no go and my contract prevents me from selling it to anyone else."

Myra deflated even more than she already had. The news was a serious blow to her, as Caroline had known it would be. But there was more.

"And in an attempt to show how environmentally friendly they are, the paper is going to switch over to that new paper. The one that's taking over everywhere." Caroline kept her eyes glued to the road as she delivered the news.

She heard Myra sob. "Corn paper..." she whispered.

Caroline nodded without looking at Myra.

"All the newest books are using corn paper, too..." Myra continued to speak in a low voice. "I used to love reading." She burst into tears.

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The rest of the trip to the store was spent in a depressed sort of silence. Louise hadn't said a word and Myra, once she stopped crying, fell into silence as well.

Caroline remained silent because she simply had no idea what to say. One thing that her friendship with Myra had taught her was a never-ending gratitude for her own health. Not only could she eat anything that she wanted to, but she even indulged in habits that even the majority of people considered dangerous, like her smoking and drinking.

During her friendship with Myra, she had learned a great deal about allergies and could not deny their existence. However, she also knew that the number of people affected was small – some would even say minuscule. That left Myra and others like her in a minority that rivaled even racial and religious minorities.

And the situation was getting worse by the day, it seemed.

Laws did not properly cover ingredients in the United States. If the ingredient was less than two percent of the product, there was no requirement to list it at all. If a preservative was sprayed onto the inside of a package, the company did not have to list it at all, because it was a packaging aid. Myra once told Caroline about a friend of hers who spend a week in the intensive care ward because of a corn based “packaging aid” that was actually a preservative. Since the aid was on the packaging and not actually on the food, the company could legally claim that the food inside the package was “preservative free.”

Practices like that terrified and angered Myra.

Even simple, everyday occurrences could be deadly to Myra

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and her daughter, Caroline knew. Many paper cups were now made from corn. The glue on the backs of stamps and envelopes had corn in it.

And now even book and newspaper pages were being made of corn products.

Through Myra, Caroline had learned that the plastic salad containers used at the majority of grocery stores were made from corn. All plastics were “going green” or being made of corn.

A death sentence for the people allergic or intolerant to corn.

Saturday's shopping trip stayed foremost in Caroline's mind throughout the weekend and into the work week. There was a feeling of urgency about her. As if she must do something to help Myra and the other people who were allergic to so many things...

Caroline finished up her latest article and then went to visit the doctor that the newspaper had on staff. He was only at the newspaper building on Mondays and Caroline was pleased to find him in his office alone.

“Doctor Iners?” She poked her head into his office and watched him as he looked through the files on his desk.

He looked up and smiled. “You're Miss Richardson, aren't you?” He straightened and motioned for her to come in.

Caroline entered and shook the hand he offered her as he stood. “Yes, I am.” She released his hand, which was sweating. “I wanted to talk to you about allergies if you have some time.”

The doctor frowned. “Are you allergic to cats or something?” he asked before realization dawned. “You're the reporter that's been writing those articles on allergies.”

Smiling, Caroline nodded. “That's me,” she confessed.

“What allergy do you have?” he asked, but he sounded like he wouldn't believe her when she told him.

Caroline shrugged. “As far as I know, I'm not allergic to anything,” she admitted. “But when I was a girl, I read a story of a boy in Texas who died after his girlfriend kissed him. She had just eaten a peanut butter cup and it turned out he was allergic to peanuts.”

Doctor Iners laughed. “I remember that story.” He shook his head. “That wasn't any sort of allergy to peanuts. The boy died

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of respiratory failure. Nothing more.”

Caroline bit her lip. “What caused the respiratory failure?”

The doctor smiled at her. “That was not uncovered.”

Caroline raised her eyebrows. “In the time since that boy's death, peanut allergies have risen. It seems as if this boy was only the first of many to die from it.”

“I don't believe in allergies,” the doctor said with a patient smile. “Neither do most of my colleagues.” He paused.

Caroline gaped. “But...” she gasped, “of course they exist. We're not talking about dragons and unicorns here.”

Doctor Iners raised his eyebrows at her. “*You* don't suffer from allergies,” he pointed out. “And *I* don't suffer from allergies.” He sighed. “And you will find that these people who claim to suffer from allergies tend to develop them out of the clear blue sky. And they get a lot of attention from...” he made quotation marks out of his fingers, “their fellow sufferers.” He lowered his hands and looked at Caroline with obvious sympathy. “And the occasional gullible reporter.”

Caroline continued to gape at him, too shocked to even be insulted. “You're saying that allergies and intolerances are...” she searched desperately for a word... any word... “some sort of mass induced hallucination or hysteria?”

The doctor nodded, apparently pleased with Caroline's word choice. “Exactly. Corn doesn't kill people. It's been around for ever, just about. And everything is made of it. Paper and plastic. And how many foods contain corn starch or corn syrup?” He shook his head, as if very sad. “Most of these people are sick, I agree. But it isn't allergies that is their problem. Research some more and see how many of them see certified physicians. You will find that they are reading medical books and articles and diagnosing themselves.” He sighed again, quite heavily. “It's really very sad.”

Trying to absorb the shock of what the doctor had just told her, Caroline took a calming breath. “Who are they supposed to turn to if their doctors are telling them they're just crazy and not allergic to corn, wheat, latex, or whatever it is they are reacting to?”

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Doctor Iners looked smug. "Doctors know best about these things," he explained to her with all the patience of a parent towards a small child. "We are educated and trained. We can't really help it if our patients aren't happy with a diagnosis of health."

Caroline sighed and held her temper in check. She had never cared for doctors, despite her good health. Every one she had met seemed too have a 'holier-than-thou' attitude about them that never failed to rub her the wrong way. Doctor Iners was no exception.

She bit her lip and nodded slowly. She knew better than to risk her job by alienating the paper's favorite consultant. Instead, she lied to him. "I suppose you have a point there, Doctor. I'll have to keep that in mind in the future."

After making up a good excuse for why she couldn't have lunch with him, Caroline left his office and considered returning to her own, but instead she left the building. She needed a cigarette. Badly.

As she smoked and allowed the beautiful spring day to relax her, she couldn't help but wonder just how right the doctor had been. So many of Myra's friends had abandoned doctors and were diagnosing themselves for allergies and intolerances. How many of them were misdiagnosing themselves? Misdiagnosing their family, friends, and even their children...?

Not for the first time, Caroline felt a wave of gratitude for her health. She also felt another wave of sympathy for those who suffered from allergies and intolerances. They couldn't *all* be crazy, could they? Least of all the ones who continually found themselves in emergency rooms and morgues...

However, she also knew that things like corn and wheat were common staples in the diet of many people. The doctor's question echoed in her mind. How many things were made of corn? Soda pop came to Caroline's mind immediately, followed by all the other things that contained corn syrup or corn starch. In her own diet, both appeared on a daily basis, right along with wheat.

Could she someday develop the allergies and intolerances that would eventually limit her diet to a few simple foods? Myra

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and her friends had once been like her – perfectly healthy. But over time, they had developed these crippling allergies...

She finished her cigarette, returned to her office, and spent the rest of her day deep in thought.

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That summer was the hottest on record, as well as the driest. Caroline enjoyed it because she had the benefit of air conditioning at home, in her car and at work. She had only to suffer from the heat when she went out on the many assignments the paper sent her on during the summer.

Of all of her assignments, she loved the book fairs the most. Part of her interviews consisted of asking many of the sellers and publishers if they would be using paper made of corn and was of mixed feelings to find out that almost all of them planned to switch to corn paper, just as her own paper had begun doing when the summer began.

Corn was abundant and made a cheap paper. The price of her newspaper had actually gone down since they switched to the corn paper, and at the book fairs she noticed that the price of books had also gone down. A wonderful thing for readers, as the price of the paper made of wood had steadily gone up over the years as the conservation of trees became a higher priority. With genetic modifications that made the corn insect and disease resistant, it looked like more and more things could be made from corn.

Not even the drought had effected the corn crop. All of the genetically modified crops were flourishing, making the option look even better to farmers all over the world. Analysts predicted that the majority of farmers would be using genetically modified seed for their crops by the end of the decade.

The drought had effected organic growers. Hot sun and no measurable rain was killing the entire organics industry's season.

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Prices of genetic foods were skyrocketing and many of their customers were staying away in droves.

Caroline watched all of this, as well as the reaction of Myra and her daughter, Louise.

"I have to grow my own food now..." Myra complained, bitterly. "I should have started years ago," she admitted in the early summer while she and Caroline planted seeds in her new garden. "I'm so lucky I own my own house. Not everyone is so fortunate."

Myra's crops did wonderfully. They thrived on bottled water and the sunshine from the sky above. City water couldn't be trusted, Myra explained. No point putting the poisons that were in the water into the plants themselves.

In July, Caroline was assigned to cover Chicago's largest food festival. Knowing that Myra and Louise were most likely allergic to almost everything there, she did not extend them an invitation. So, she was shocked to run into them once the bulk of her research was done and she was finally able to enjoy the festival as just another citizen.

She found them with a group of others, picnicking on tables provided by the city. Myra introduced Caroline as 'my normal friend' and Caroline did not miss some of the resentful looks that came her way. But the whole group seemed to warm to her when they learned that she was a newspaper reporter.

Despite her knowledge that any article she wrote would be ignored, Caroline listened to their stories. Her thirst for knowledge was great and she wanted to learn more about allergies and intolerances.

One of Myra's middle aged friends looked at her with a crooked and almost mean grin on her face.

"Did you know that sometimes allergic reactions don't even begin for twenty-four or forty-eight hours after contact?" she asked, sweetly. "My biggest problem is with wheat. Occasionally, I'll feel it immediately. It feels like I swallowed glass. But my *classic* reaction is different. About twenty-four hours after eating something I *thought* was safe, I'm in the bathroom. Diarrhea. The wet and explosive kind. Pissing out

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my asshole diarrhea... All of that accompanied by pain and bloating, nausea and gas. I can't have anything on my stomach. My whole body gets inflamed." Her voice was getting heated. "And it's not just my digestive system, either. My lungs get affected as well. I can't fucking chuckle without setting off an acute asthma attack." She eyed the unlit cigarette between Caroline's fingers.

Caroline sighed and put it away. She had forgotten that she was planning on lighting up before she spied Myra and Louise with their friends.

The woman continued. "It also sets off my joint and connective tissue disorder. I can't move without pain. I can't pull a blanket off of myself to go to the bathroom because my hands and fingers hurt so bad." Tears were beginning to form in her eyes. "I can't do steps because my knees hurt so bad. My knees have given up on me while I sit on the toilet. I can't get up. I can only sit there with my pants around my ankles, crying and waiting for the pain to stop enough so I can stand and maybe regain some dignity." She sniffed and a single tear escaped. "My back, my feet, my shoulders, my neck. Pain, stiffness and swelling. Everywhere." She sniffed again and took a moment to regain her composure. "The digestive stuff lasts three or four days. The rest lasts for six weeks." Her head dropped to her chest and another woman put her arm gently around the woman's shoulders, comfortingly.

Caroline watched as she was watched. A healthy person among the sick. She wanted to ask why their doctors didn't help, but she knew that most, if not all of them, had given up on doctors long ago. Doctors were the enemy. Doctors called them crazy, hysterical liars.

A dark haired man looked at her. "My daughter's worse symptoms are psychological. It starts out physical, like Anne." He nodded towards the woman who was being comforted. "Diarrhea, bloating, pain. Tears..." he sighed. "But the day after that, the emotional stuff starts. Wailing and not knowing why. Hating everything and everyone around her, even her mother and I. Demanding why we had her. Why we did this to her. Why we

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made her broken. She curses us and she breaks things. Then she collapses into her mother's arms and says she wants to die.” His look intensified. “Gluten is *evil*, lady,” he informed her. “Put *that* in your paper.” He stiffened. “It causes schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, depression, obsessive compulsive disorders, ADHD, and anger management problems. Medications don't work. Only going gluten free works. Or corn free. Or whatever it is that is causing these problems.”

Caroline continued to watch the small band of people. All of them had paper bags which contained food they could eat, since most everything the city was offering was poison to them.

After a tense minute, she mumbled apologies and wandered off.

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Caroline read the article over her usual Saturday morning breakfast. Despite the pouring rain outside, she was dry and comfortable. She ate her sausage, eggs, pancakes and toast almost automatically, reading the article over and over as if the words would change.

World health officials announced that they would go one step further in the cloud seeding that has brought much needed rains to drought plagued areas in North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Australia throughout the crop growing seasons of the last several years.

The rain from the clouds will bring genetically modified vitamins, minerals and pesticides to crops, making the worlds food supply healthier and more resistant to insects and blight.

“Science can now work side by side with Mother Nature,” one of the spokesman for the health organization explained. “Once introduced to the water supply, the modifications will become permanent.”

Caroline let out an almost explosive breath and reached for her cigarettes. She wondered, as she lit up, why this wonderful news did not please her. If the health officials were right, the new cloud seeding methods would bring healthier foods to everyone.

“Because I don't know what is in these genetically modified vitamins, minerals and pesticides...” she mumbled before she took a long drag of her cigarette. “And because once it gets into the water supply, there will be no getting rid of it. No going back. If

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they are wrong ...”

The ringing of her telephone brought her back from her spiraling thoughts. She took her cigarettes and moved to the living room.

“You have to come!” Caroline barely recognized Louise's voice. “Momma is dying!” The girl was just barely rational. Borderline hysterical.

Caroline acknowledged long enough to tell the girl she was on her way and to call 9-1-1 in the meantime. She grabbed her keys and rushed out of the door.

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She had grown into a beautiful young woman. Neither too tall, nor too short. Her weight was within five pounds of the accepted maximum. The red hair she had inherited from her mother was now long, flowing, and luxuriant.

Caroline had not seen her since Myra's memorial service, where her friend had had her final wishes realized. She had been cremated and her ashes secretly scattered into the waters of Lake Michigan.

"Maybe I will be consumed by some healthy person. I can be healthy vicariously through someone else," she had explained just before she died.

In the ten years since, Caroline had thought of her friend many times, as well as young Louise, who went to live with relatives after her mother's death.

Myra had been struggling to breathe when Caroline arrived at her home. Paramedics were fighting with her, trying to help. Caroline drove behind the ambulance to the hospital, where she fought with doctors and nurses to make sure that Louise could be with her mother like she wanted.

Myra murmured her last words to her daughter and best friend less than an hour later, then died in what looked to both observers like a great deal of distress.

The family was notified and came to collect Louise after the memorial, which was attended only by Myra's friends and daughter. Louise stayed with Caroline until that time, surprising both of them by having no reaction to the cigarette smoke that

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was a permanent part of Caroline's home. She prepared her own meals, but Caroline had spent several days worried that the child would wind up just like her mother because of something in her pantry. Both were relieved when there were no allergic reactions of any kind.

Louise was nearly ten years older and back in Chicago. She was interested in journalism and had secured an internship with Caroline.

They currently sat in the coffee shop across the street from the newspaper building. The very one that Caroline had suggested to Myra the first time they had dined together. Myra had declined because of her allergies.

"They said the cause of death was respiratory failure," Louise spoke of her mother to Caroline for the first time since her mother's death. She looked into her coffee cup and sighed. "But it was suicide. Suicide by corn."

Caroline sighed deeply. She had seen the ear of corn at Myra's house before the paramedics took her away.

"First her ears itched. Then her tongue started tingling and went numb. Her mouth was burning. Her throat, too," Louise remembered. "She broke out into hives. Her mouth... You remember what her mouth looked like."

Caroline did, but she only nodded in response. It had looked like a little kid had applied lipstick sloppily around Myra's mouth. Hives were on her lips as well as in her mouth.

"Her throat swelled shut and I could hear the fluid in her lungs..." Louise continued, her voice soft. "She tried to hit her inhaler, but it was too late. Too late to change her mind about killing herself..."

Caroline knew the rest. Myra went into shock after she spoke her last words to her daughter and her best friend. Her blood pressure dropped and then her heart stopped. And she died.

Epinephrine didn't help. Nothing helped.

"What happened to you?" Caroline finally asked, almost desperate to change the subject.

Louise got a sad smile on her face. "My aunt took me in," she explained. "She and Mom never got along, but that's where I

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wound up.” She bit her lip. “She had me tested. I’d never been tested before. Turns out I am allergic to peanuts. But not as strongly as I thought I was.”

Caroline’s jaw dropped in shock. “But the rest...” she began.

Louise shrugged. “Psychosomatic,” she sighed. “I think Mom was allergic to corn, wheat, and milk. I saw her reactions. Even when she didn’t *know* she was eating it, she had those reactions. The other allergies, I’m not so sure about.”

Caroline found herself confused. Louise reached over and patted her hand. “Mom wasn’t crazy,” she said vehemently. “Her allergies were *real* and she did what she could for me. But sometimes living with someone with allergies...” she shrugged. “I contracted mine sympathetically. Needless to say, I don’t have *half* of the allergies now that I had as a child. I had a friend who had allergies too, and she outgrew hers. Maybe that’s what I’ve done, but *I* believe they were psychosomatic.” She looked into Caroline’s eyes. “That’s why I’m here. And why the others are ...” her voice trailed off.

In the ten years since the initial genetic cloud seeding and rain, millions of people had died. It wasn’t just the newly modified plants and animals. The adoption of corn paper caused millions of unexplained deaths as well.

Approximately five percent of the world’s population died mysteriously in the first two years after Myra killed herself using corn. Most died of ‘respiratory failure’, but several were found near books or newspapers that were made of corn. Many more were simply found dead at home. But in this day and age, what home didn’t have something in it made from paper or plastic? Paper and plastic made from corn?

Books, computer cases, pens, drinking straws, television cases, newspapers, plastic plates and utensils, thread, clothing, children’s toys of incalculable number, radios, the steering wheels in cars, chairs, car interiors, paints, vacuum cleaners, bed sheets, compact disk cases, household cleaning products, clocks and watches, remote controls, napkins, bath towels, cameras, diapers, toothbrushes, hair brushes, plastic wrap, shoes, plastic bottles, glue, glasses, nail polish, computer keyboards, gloves,

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mouthwash, pillows, crayons, yarn, briefcases, stereo equipment, Styrofoam, staplers, pet flea baths, and odor removers being only the barest fraction of things that contained corn or corn derivatives.

It was killing people, and no one seemed to make the connection.

“They are about all died off now, I think,” Louise said, the sadness plain in her voice. “The ones with allergies, anyway. People with intolerances are still muddling through, even with *all* the food now somehow genetically enhanced.”

Caroline nodded her agreement. “The enhancements have caused more good than harm.” She was forced to admit. “But the price was so high.”

Louise smiled a sardonic smile. “They say that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,” she said. “Humanity has weeded out the sick and the weak and now only the strong survive.”

Caroline sighed deeply and found herself near tears. “Myra was one of the strongest women I had ever known.”

Louise nodded her agreement. “I wish things could have been different,” she whispered. “I wish they would have listened.”

Caroline swallowed and sighed, but said nothing.

The women continued their genetically altered meal in silence.

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About the Author

Crystal Brewton – also known as the Indie Author Extraordinaire – has crafted rich novels and stories on nearly every subject line, spanning from erotic romance to horror to sheer revenge. Some of her best-known tales include her popular *Cassandra's Cops* series, her science fiction piece *Caeli's Daniachew*, and the erotic short story collection *Rainy Day Confessions*. Brewton, who grew up in Chicago, currently lives in sunny California with her three children. *Caeli's Daniachew* was nominated for the 2006 CBS Parallax Award. View all of Ms. Brewton's works and much more online at www.crystalbrewton.biz
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