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The River of Time

By

David Brin

I don't think anyone knows exactly when it began. It seemed a fatal disease, at first. Dozens, possibly hundreds, were buried or cremated before the ComaSlow epidemic was recognized for what it was.

It was a pseudodeath that struck without warning. There was no precursor, no symptom that gave any clue to its coming.

Its victims were often found in bed, apparently asleep, yet rigid and unrousable. They were discovered on sidewalks, vacant-eyed and poised precariously in mid-stride. At office desks the ComaSlow were found staring blankly at papers, pencils poised above undotted i's.

These corpses remained warm. Under careful scrutiny, they were found to consume oxygen and give off carbon dioxide. Their stiffness shared only one attribute with rigor mortis... an adamant resistance to motion.

Nobody had ever seen anything like it before. Soon a public investigation was launched.

Several weeks after the epidemic was recognized, the wheels of government reaction creaked far enough to pull me into this mess. By the time the Emergency Management Agency got around to drawing from its "Crackpot Consultant" list, I had seen the new death strike several acquaintances, two close friends, and—before my eyes—my agent.

Larry Carpis was treating me to lunch at Goldfarb's, a medium-priced restaurant not far from his office, where he traditionally took his clients in the "bright, young, and promising" category.

I had barely touched my steak, so involved was I with my own brilliance. I made grand gestures with my hands, telling Harry about my idea for another "Harold Freebooter" novel.

Carpis ate slowly, as a rule, and spoke little over a meal. He had a tendency to pause and consider beforehand when he did comment. Because of this, it was hard for me to tell exactly when the change occurred. I noticed that he had taken on a particularly bemused expression, a forkful of chef's salad midway to his mouth. He looked my way attentively, but when I shifted in my seat I saw that his gaze didn't follow me.

I never did find out what Larry thought of my novel. It was a pretty good idea, if I do say so myself. Naturally, it never got written.

One stricken day later I was awakened early by a pounding on my door. Bleary-eyed, I opened it to face two very large, very starched military policemen.

"Are you Daniel Brand, the sci-fi writer?" the larger of the two asked.

"Um, that's science fiction. Besides, I write a lot of fact articles... too."

I was speaking on automatic pilot. Here were two big MPs on my doorstep, and I was giving them one of my standard cocktail party responses. Rise and shine.

"Sorry, sir. Science fiction. I'll remember that." He nodded. "Mr. Brand, we have orders to ask you to come with us. Your special commission with the Emergency Management Agency has been activated."

I must have stared like a dummy. All that was getting through to me was that I was about to be taken somewhere by two Brobdingnagians with guns... and before my morning orange juice!

At this point, one of my characters would have drawn his laser pistol... or spoken up loudly so that the robot doorbell could later tell his best friend what had happened. Or he'd have coolly disarmed his would-be captors and escaped out the bathroom window. I managed to surpass those schemes by grunting, "My what?"

"Your special commission with the Emergency Management Agency, sir. You've been receiving a yearly emolument to keep your name and address on a list of unconventional consultants for hypothetical national crises. Surely you remember, sir?"

Never let anyone tell you a giant can't fit his mouth around twenty-dollar words.

I did recall, at last. My yearly stipend had been a paltry one hundred dollars a year, ten percent going to Larry because it had been his idea to have me sign up in the first place. In exchange I had agreed to advise my country should little green men ever land, or dinosaurs rise up out of the sea, or whatever... and I promised to drop a card to a board corporal in a small office in a Pentagon subbasement, should I ever change my address. The program had been budgeted for twenty years in advance by one of our recent, workaholic Presidents, when he found out the U.S. didn't have a game plan in the event a giant comet or something was discovered headed for the Earth. I think he used money stolen from the White House janitorial

budget.

"They want me," I said.

"Yessir," the erudite truncheon-wielder confirmed. "Now, if you'll please get dressed... ?"

I was allowed to take my briefcase and a toothbrush. The rest "would be provided when I joined the crisis team."

As we left my apartment building, we saw two ambulances pull away, carrying a few more of the night's catatonics. The bystanders watched with none of the typical detachment of New Yorkers. One could tell they were afraid.

"Am I finally going to meet Carl Sagan?" I asked as the MPs hustled me into a green government Plymouth.

"Nossir," the one with the vocabulary answered. "I believe he's already become a victim. The computer chose you as the surviving consultant with the best set of qualifications. We're now taking you to the main medical team at Johns Hopkins, where they are expecting you."

That's how I became a big shot in the investigation of the ComaSlow near-death. A computer picked me. I remember thinking that there must have been a lot of victims, already, for the poor machine to have gotten so hard up.

The hospitals were in chaos. Chronic-care units were filled to overflowing with immobile humanity. Armories and high school gymnasiums were converted to handle the growing number of victims.

The symptoms were frightening.

Physicians listened to heartbeats that dragged on, lonely and deep, for over a minute per. They worried over eyes that refused to blink, yet remained somehow moist. They despaired over encephalograms whose spikes could be counted in single neuron flashes, adding up to a complex pattern that was... normal!

But most disconcerting of all was each patient's facial expression. In its glacial rigidity, each visage bore none of the calm mindlessness one might expect from a catatonic. There was no balm of sleep. Instead, most of the victims gradually assumed a mask of pitifully frozen, and apparently intelligent, panic.

The appellation "ComaSlow" had been given when it was discovered that the patients retained some vestigial powers of movement. Left unwatched for a night, a victim was often found, later, on his feet near his bed, like a statue of a man or woman trying to walk away. Occasionally two of the stricken would be discovered by the morning light facing each other from neighboring beds, eyes apparently focused, one or both with mouth half-open, in a frozen tableau of mock, furtive conversation.

The epidemic had struck 1 in 200 by the time I joined Unit Prime. The ratio was 1

in 55, a month later. It was becoming nigh impossible to care for and restrain so many patients. Intravenous feeding was stretching the medical establishment to its limit.

That was the situation the day Dr. Hunter and I walked into a Task Force meeting with our results. I opened the door for her, but I didn't accompany Hunter to the head of the table. After one month I was still a bit of an alien element here... in spite of the powers and confidence granted me by the computers of the FEMA.

Hunter hefted a sheaf of scrawled notes and drawings above the heavy oak table.

"These were all written by our patients!" she announced. She sent the sheaf floating chaotically down the polished surface, leaving a scattered trail of papers along its path. The doctors picked these up and looked at them.

Hunter motioned toward me as she addressed the group.

"You all recall how hard Commissioner Brand and I had to work to persuade you to let some of the victims left alone, with pencils and paper? Well, these are the results of that experiment. Left unbothered, they produced these documents!"

Most of the scratchings were pathetic—the sort a normal person might scrawl if kept in solitude, constantly abused and prodded by remote, capricious powers.

One page was different, though. The message was clearly, if hurriedly, printed. In clear block letters it read:

WHO ARE YOU?

DO YOU KNOW ENGLISH?

WE WISH YOU NO HARM!

PLEASE REPLY SLOWL

The note ended abruptly. Hunter explained that a nurse, concerned that the patient's bedding had not been changed in two days, had intervened, destroying the last sentence.

The others looked from Hunter to me, perplexed.

"Don't you see?" I cried out in frustration. "This fellow is obviously intelligent and patient. With extraordinary resourcefulness he has tried to cram a brief message into what must have been, to him, barely an instant, in order to communicate with the all-powerful invisible beings who are holding him prisoner! We move too fast, from his point of view, even to be seen! He thinks we're extraterrestrials, perhaps. How else could he rationalize what's happening to him?"

"One moment he's walking down the street. Then, in a blur, he suddenly finds himself in a hospital bed, pummeled and poked every few seconds, his limbs arbitrarily rearranged for him, and his every movement thwarted!"

One elderly pandemicist scratched his head. "Are you saying that these catatonic

individuals aren't really sick at all? That they are competent, if tremendously slowed?"

I looked at Hunter in despair. This was just what we had been trying to tell them for two weeks.

Hunter interrupted. I suppose she wanted to make certain I didn't louse things up with my temper.

"Yes," she said. "And this leads us to the conclusion that this epidemic is not a medical problem at all, but one calling for the expertise of physical scientists... and perhaps psychics and holy men. Maybe even sci-fi writers, as well."

I grimaced at that, but kept my trap shut.

She could tell that this was coming a bit too thick and fast for the venerable physicians present, so she hurried on to the sugar coating.

"It has also occurred to us, ladies and gentlemen, that this offers a fine way out of the crisis we are fast approaching... that of too few hospital beds and overworked medical staff. The idea, once you get used to it, is quite appealing..."

She was right, of course, on all counts. The immediate problem of care and maintenance would be solved soon. Just in time, as a matter of fact. For while we debated, the second whammy had already struck.

The new phenomenon began, a month after the onset of the ComaSlow epidemic, with a series of very strange deaths—or rather "disappearances." People simply vanished. Poof.

And no sooner was the first vanishing noticed than the practical jokes began.

Barking dogs appeared, as if instantaneously teleported, on the desks of stuffy senior executives. Men and women walking down the street suddenly found their clothes gone, as if vaporized in the wink of an eye. Burglar alarms went off all over town and food vanished from plates in every fancy restaurant. •

Some atrocities occurred. The worst was when a jetliner crashed. Someone apparently lassoed its landing gear with a steel cable when it was ten feet into the air on takeoff. Nobody saw it happen, or even glimpsed the culprit.

A number of famous and beautiful women disappeared from public places, to be found minutes later, at points across town, somewhat bruised and disheveled, with no recollection of anything but a chaotic blur.

Some people who had been enemies of certain "vanishers" met gruesome ends, as did several politicians and the head of nearly every organized-crime family.

But in light of the theory we were developing, we were surprised at how little damage was being done... considering what the Vanishers were capable of, and their growing numbers.

The burglar alarms, for instance, often led to the discovery that someone had simply been "poking around." Little of value was taken. Normal criminals often found themselves "teleported" directly to prison. At least that's how it appeared to

the dazed police.

Will I be forgiven a slight understatement if I say that the average citizen did not need this aggravation, in addition to the fear over being the next ComaSlow victim?

The man on the street, subject at any moment to the whim of some entity who might stick itching powder down his back or a garter snake down his pants, began to take on the same helpless, panicky look we had become accustomed to seeing on our patients at Johns Hopkins.

We brought in the physicists, all right. And the psychics and mystics and "sci-fi" writers, as well. They just about killed each other, screaming for Zeitgeist priority, but finally they all agreed on one thing. We were experiencing a profound and irksome muckup in *time*.

Great. Hunter and I had already figured that out.

To everyone's immense relief, our suggestion on how to solve the ComaSlow problem appeared to work, at least. Instead of treating the victims as sick people, we simply turned them loose and let them run the hospitals themselves.

Soon there were whole villages set aside for their use. MPs guarded the perimeters and inspectors dropped by once every week or two to check on things and to deliver food. Otherwise, the ComaSlow soon were coping quite well.

The Slow towns were eerie places, for all of that. Those permitted to visit them felt as if they had come upon a place where some mad, prolific sculptor had run amuck, leaving utterly lifelike renderings of people going about their business: cooking meals, eating them... someone coming back a week later might see the same statue washing the dishes.

If only the problem of the Vanishers had been as easy to solve.

Hunter and I dragged a card table and typewriter to a spot beneath the most prominent billboard in town. We hired two signpainters noted for their speed, and gave them a message to write.

When we'd had the idea, we realized that there wasn't a moment to lose. A minute wasted was a day to the Vanishers. Still and all, I was glad I'd spent the moment it took to grab a bottle of scotch on our way out of my apartment. Sitting there beneath the billboard, I took a healthy belt, then passed the bottle to Hunter as we watched the painters write:

VANISHERS! PLEASE CONTACT US!

No sooner was the line finished than Hunter, the signpainters, and I suddenly felt our clothes disappear. I experienced a burning sensation, as if very fine sandpaper had been quickly rubbed against my arms and legs. Hunter jumped up and cried out.

This wasn't what we'd had in mind as "contact," but it was a beginning.

I had warned the signpainters what to expect. I was proud of those guys. They jumped briefly in surprise then grimly went back to work, painting our message in their birthday suits.

The next line went:

TALK! BE KIND! WE'RE KIND TO THE
COMASLOW! WE'RE READY TO

They didn't finish the line before another flurry of activity hit us. In an instant my head was shaved bare. Dr. Hunter's beautiful mammeries were painted a brilliant blue, as were... ahem... parts of my own anatomy. And a maelstrom of scrawled notes rose from the stack of paper next to my typewriter. The messages jammed and flurried in front of my face, holding still barely long enough for me to catch a flavor of derision.

Then, in two seconds, the paper storm was interrupted. I had the briefest glimpse of one, no two, unconscious men lying on the sidewalk. They vanished quickly, and in the same instant my limbs were jerked about and I found myself back in my clothes.

The cyclone of paper resumed, a little slower and apparently more conciliatory in tone. I guessed that we had been rescued from the first bunch of Vanishers by a second, more responsible group.

As quickly as I could, I typed:

GET ORGANIZED! HOLD NOTES STILL LONGER!
I AM EMPOWERED, IN THE NAME OF THE UN
EMERGENCY TASK FORCE, TO DEPUTIZE A
RESPONSIBLE PERSON AS

The note disappeared, then instantly reappeared with the words "a responsible person" crossed out and "HERMAN WUNKLER" inserted.

I had to think for two seconds. To Herman Wunkler it must have been a long hour.

I recognized the name as that of a philosophy professor at Crosstown College. He was over fifty years old, before he vanished. He had a reputation as a bright teacher and an easy grader.

What all that implied was good enough for me. I finished typing the order authorizing Wunkler to organize the Vanishers along lines parallel to the normal constitutional channels, with a quasi-martial charge to protect and consult us normals

however possible.

On typing the last period, I found a pen in my hand, poised above the bottom of the page. I signed quickly. If Wunkler had been able to watch me all this while, he must already have a fair-size band of followers to help him. It would take them little time to find and ransack the right government offices to verify my authority.

I counted the seconds as I turned to give thumbs up to Hunter. She smiled back at me, confidently.

At a count of eight a cold beer suddenly appeared in my left hand. A lit cigar (my favorite brand) popped into the other. Dr. Hunter started a little when our cardtable was replaced by a huge mahogany desk and our folding chairs by plush recliners.

With a bright, striped canopy overhead, Hunter and I labored for two hours to speed-read a chain of reports that appeared before our eyes like tachistoscope images. We quickly learned a technique to show "Yes" or "No" answers with a wink of either eye.

In one hundred minutes we had a social order set up. All at once, all over the country, the practical jokes virtually stopped.

Naturally, we had to begin a total rewrite of physical law.

By all rights the Speedoes (as the Vanishers were soon called) should have burnt up from their own superfast metabolisms, if not from simple air friction as they moved. The Slows (as the ComaSlow were now called) should have fallen over, mid-stride, every time they took a step.

A mind could find more than enough boggles, if it looked for them.

Somehow we sorted things out. More people went fast or slow. We started dividing the cities into zones set aside for each speed. A barter economy developed, with computers used for communication.

We counted on the fast ones for protection, and it appeared to be working. Speedo policemen watched over us. Speedo firemen kept us from harm.

Hunter wasn't optimistic, though, and I could see her point. At this rate, wouldn't three separate races develop? How many generations would it take for the accelerated to forget their kinship with Normals, or Normals their responsibility to the Slows?

She and I had only a couple of months to think about it. Soon word came "down" that Professor Wunkler had died, at age one hundred and two. Next the computers told us of a growing panic among our faster cousins.

I swear, it never occurred to us that the process might continue!

A certain fraction of the Fast were now leaping even *faster* along the timetrack! The practical jokes that began again were mostly visited upon the "merely Fast." The new "Superfast" apparently thought it a bore to mess up statues who couldn't react during their lifetimes, so they mostly left the Normals and the Slows alone.

We had to invent new terminology. The new level of Speedoes was called Fastrack II. It took years, from our point of view, for our cousins in Fastrack I to negotiate an arrangement such as Hunter and I had negotiated with *them*. Then our cities were divided into fourths. When the Slows had *their* branching we divided again.

A number of physicists, who had thought they'd figured out what was going on, went mad, committed suicide, or quietly changed professions.

I have contemplated the possibility that the Universe at one time truly *did* circle around the Earth... that ancient philosophers were *right* in their cruder models of reality, with their simple crystal spheres and pinholes in a velvet sky. Perhaps there were powers which, once mankind was about to understand his cage and find out the rules, frustrated him by the simple expedient of expanding the range of the possible.

It makes one wonder.

Hunter and I have three children now. In an odd way we have what every parent who ever loved his kids secretly wanted. In Emma, Cassandra, and Abel we have a covey of dreams come true.

Abel is our oldest child. He was twelve when he made the transition to Fastrack I, a full three weeks before his sister Cassandra, and Hunter and I, were caught up in our own shift to the same level.

During those weeks he was brought up by some pleasant people and he became a fine man—strong, intelligent, and kind. After we joined him, he introduced us to our nearly grown grandchildren.

I said Cassandra came with us, didn't I? Yes, she's a wonderful child... a lot of fun and always springing surprises on us. She's aggravating and delightful and grows day by day before our eyes. Hunter and I are convinced she'll always be with us... at least for the remainder of her childhood.

Emma was the prettiest of our children. "Was" is a bad word, for she'll be beautiful and seven for the rest of our lives. She was left behind when we made the shift. No one knows any way to control the passage among the timelines, so we had to accept it.

No matter. One becomes philosophical. We carried her, with a note pinned to her sweater, to our friends the Neales, who are as nice as can be. We pop by, from time to time, just to look in on our baby. Whatever she does, her hair is brushed. Hunter insists, even when we find Emma sliding between bases in Little League. I sigh about "meddling," but I know she likes to know we're there. To her we'll be around for so little time.

Besides, the traffic goes both ways now, haphazard as it is. Someday Emmie too might leave the Main Timeline, and be reunited with us.

Which *is* the Main Timeline? I wonder. We've tried to be careful to keep track, but can we be sure? By what units could we measure this change?

Our worries over a tyranny of the Fast were mostly for naught. The new timelines seem to appear every decade or so, from the point of view of the line farthest "forward"... meaning they come into existence every few milliseconds from my present perspective.

It makes no logical sense. None at all, by the old premises. But somehow there are people to populate the lines, and room for all.

People flow back and forth across the streams like fish caught in different parts of the same river, some swept by swift currents, and others drifting slowly near the shore. We trade and cross-fertilize. The inventions that filter down are wonderful, but we always seem to have something of value to trade for them. Somehow we all seem to remain human.

I consult for the Fastrack I government now. They think highly of me here. Something like a reincarnated Benjamin Franklin. There is even a small market for my science fiction, though the heyday of that genre appears to be past.

Hunter and I go nowhere without each other. It may be superstition, but we feel that if you grab someone you love and hold him or her tight, when you feel the change coming on, you'll shift time tracks together.

I hope so.

I have meditated long and hard on this, while we do our stints of guard duty together, protecting one of the slower sections.

In my meditation I notice that a new way of thinking has begun to replace the old. I see the sun rise every morning. A mockingbird buzzes by my head whenever I wander past the tree that holds her nest. Each year the leaves change color and the Fastrack I farmers gather their harvest.

How can a day be a day on each timeline? Does the same mockingbird buzz for my Fast and Slow neighbors, as well?

How can the lines keep multiplying? Will there be a time when it all comes full circle? When the slowest of the Slow meet the fastest of the Fast, and send a chain of practical jokes rolling down the pike, growing in power and bad taste at every pass around the loop?

These are questions the old logic might have asked,

and I know they are false. For the river is legend. Its tributaries merge, far downstream from the glacier where once a trickle was all we knew.

How smug we have all become, in our adaptability. We claim to understand, to be at *home* on the great river!

Yet it widens, and deepens, as it flows.

And eventually, there is the Sea.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Originally, its title was "Coexistence." It is a little tale, one of my earliest, and the only one I've ever written almost precisely as it came to me in a dream.