

Character Flu by Robert Reed

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported this year that the flu shot administered around the US was effective against only 40% of this year's flu viruses. Keep that in mind as you read this little bit of speculation.

Look at me.

That's right, you don't know me.

Now please, put down your drink and pay attention to me. I'm here as a courtesy, and there's something very important that you have to understand.

Are you listening?

There's a new disease, and without question, it's the worst ever. There's never been anything like it. Not in the history of mankind, not even close. Nanobodies: Synthetically produced nanotic machinery. The idiots in the interactive industry built the monsters. Of course they didn't appreciate what they had. Couldn't imagine the dangers. When their bug went wild, they called that "an exceptionally minor nonevent." When the bug learned to self-replicate, they promised to rein it in with some elegant little fixes. And today, after throwing fifty billion dollars at the problem, those responsible have admitted they're beaten. Their monsters have evolved into a plague that's highly transmittable, unnoticed by any immune system. Just one microscopic machine gets ingested or slips through the skin, and within minutes, it's riding the bloodstream to the brain. And once there, it generates hundreds of billions of examples of its perfect, insidious self.

No, it doesn't bring death.

For a long time, there aren't any symptoms. No fevers. No weakness. No diminishment of body or mind. In fact, the fully infected person sports a boosted IQ, plus this giant imagination. But that's not surprising, since the original nanobody was designed to do exactly that. Those trillion invaders link up with their host's neurons, streamlining an assortment of brain functions, and suddenly tasks that used to be difficult become astonishingly easy.

No, the disease doesn't kill.

It creates.

During the last six months, the population of the world has increased two hundredfold. And that's the conservative estimate.

No, you haven't heard anything about this plague. And there's a perfectly good explanation why you haven't.

Listen.

What happened was that those tech-wizards in the interactive market -- those creative geniuses of commerce -- thought it would be fun and sweet, not to mention lucrative, to build gaming platforms that their customers could carry wherever they went, embedded inside willing skulls. That's why the nanobodies do what they do. They bring improvements to cognitive functions. Think of them as an upgrade of old hardware. A little perk to every user. The brain gets quicker and smarter, so there's plenty of room for whatever diversion the buyer desires. And creativity has to be boosted, if only so the player can enjoy an experience that's promised to be unlike any other on the market today.

And the nanobody that went wild...?

It invents characters. Phony people that seem very real to the user. The entire package isn't much different from certain computer games that were popular during the last century. But then again, when hasn't human history been full of fictional worlds and imaginary friends?

This is how the disease works:

An infected person thinks of somebody. He picks a face in the crowd, or she dreams somebody up from nothing. Fantasy souls of their own invention. Then the machinery builds a character to match the face, guided by the host's supercharged creativity. These new entities are so carefully drawn that they acquire many if not all of the aspects of real life. Independence. Self-awareness. A life story, plus a huge capacity for love and hate.

Give the wild nanobodies a few busy weeks, and they'll infect any skull with a town's worth of artfully rendered citizens. These new people inhabit any dreamed-up landscape that suits them. Mountains are popular, and beaches, and drinking establishments, too. In principle, the infected person can visit whenever he wants, talk and touch whomever he wants. But he sees only tiny slivers of his new friends' rich, enormous lives.

Why is that bad?

Okay, that's a fair question.

Trouble comes sooner or later. You see, those fictional souls have their own lucid daydreams. Maybe they imagine a secret lover, or they want to have a child or three. Whatever the inspiration, they can trigger the same machinery that created them in the first place. And what's been a manageable population swells, and a disease that was only a nuisance suddenly overwhelms the infected, overtaxed mind.

This wouldn't happen with the original nanobody. It couldn't. But the wild bug has dropped all of the carefully contrived safeguards.

No matter how much genius a person carries, he has limits. The first symptom is to lose the elevated IQ. Then decision-making and recall slow down. If left unchecked, the infected person falls into a deep sleep, followed by a coma, while his brain works slower and slower as an entire nation of fictional souls struggle to live their important lives.

To date, the only treatment -- not a cure, mind you, but only a short-term fix -- is to physically remove these parasitic characters.

And it's not an easy fix.

I won't mention the physical constraints, which are enormous. But worse are the ethical problems. Purge the mind of thousands of living souls, and what are you doing?

You're committing mass murder, some say.

Says hundreds of billions of people, if you bother to ask them.

The imagined souls, yes.

But if humanity doesn't fight this runaway plague, everybody will become a host. Everybody will be unconscious and helpless. The meat-and-bone population of the world will live out its days in hospital beds, their minds progressively declining, their minimal needs tended to by machinery and empathetic

software.

So you see, this is the worst disease ever.

No matter what the response, billions and eventually trillions of sentient entities are going to die. Will have to be killed. Yet for the time being, there is no other viable option.

Believe me when I say this: The best that we can do is to treat every last casualty with the same respect that humans would want, if these tragic roles were reversed.

Now put down the drink again, please.

No, I don't think you have been paying attention. Not like you should have been!

You're right. I haven't introduced myself.

Think of me as an angel.

As a servant from On High.

Now do I have your attention?

In the clearest possible terms, this angel is telling you that you have exactly one day to make peace with everybody in your world, and with yourself.

Did you hear me?

One day.

Or do I need to explain all this to you again?